How can Australia tackle the obesity epidemic?

Summary

• The Queensland Department of Health commissioned a rapid review to look at what population-level strategies are effective in encouraging healthy eating and physical activity to inform the development of a national obesity strategy.

• The review found strong evidence for a range of interventions to effectively tackle obesity including public policy responses such as regulations and support for community action and behaviour change initiatives.

• Examples of the initiatives found to be effective include: increasing the price of unhealthy food and drinks; reducing the exposure of children to the promotion of unhealthy food and drinks; and workplace interventions to reduce prolonged sitting times and enable physical activity.

• Because the causes of obesity are complex, the best way to bring about the greatest change is through a comprehensive strategy drawing on many different approaches.

What is the issue?

Overweight and obesity rates have increased rapidly in Australia over the last 40 years, with 63% of adults and 27% of children now affected. The causes are complex and influenced by many social and environmental factors, with people of lower socioeconomic status in particular being more likely to be obese compared with other groups. These high rates of obesity have serious health consequences, as the condition is a major risk factor for a range of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and many cancers. This disease burden impacts people and their families, and has considerable economic consequences.

Figure 1: Overweight and obesity in Australia

In Australia, 63% of adults and 27% of children are now considered overweight or obese. 

Key interventions shown to be effective:

- **Healthy eating**: interventions involving public policy, regulation and legislation such as improving food and drink labelling, increasing the price of unhealthy food and drinks, implementing advertising restrictions on unhealthy food and drinks and developing healthy school food and drink policies.

- **Physical activity**: improvements to parks and playgrounds, including making them more accessible; and multi-component interventions in schools and workplaces.

- **Society and culture**: some mass media campaigns aimed at altering health-related behaviours at the population level; and interventions that offer direct financial incentives for people to lose weight or improve diet / physical activity.

- **Health care**: support for breastfeeding; and nutrition guidance in pre- and ante-natal care.

Key interventions that show promise:

- **Healthy eating**: adoption of front-of-pack nutrition warning labels for products high in sodium, saturated fat, added sugar and/or energy content; restriction of temporary price reductions/promotions on unhealthy food and drink products; and restrictions on unhealthy food and drink marketing.

- **Physical activity**: changes to the built environment to improve walkability, cycling and public transport use; and supporting school-based interventions to increase physical activity in children.

- **Society and culture**: engaging local communities to lead their own healthy eating and physical activity initiatives; and rolling out a consistent national approach to regularly measure children’s height and weight at key stages of schooling.
**Healthy eating**
- Reduce exposure of children to junk food advertising on TV and radio
- Increase the price of sugar-sweetened beverages and other unhealthy foods
- Improve nutrition information (e.g., Health Star Rating system) in supermarkets and other food outlets
- Increase requirements for healthy food and drinks in schools and early childhood settings
- Support interventions to encourage healthier options in supermarkets, restaurants and take-away outlets
- Provide nutrition interventions and healthy food subsidies for those in remote communities

**Physical activity**
- Improve access to quality parks and playground areas
- Support school and workplace interventions to encourage physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviour

**Culture & society**
- Fund mass media behaviour change campaigns
- Increase use and uptake of the Australian Dietary Guidelines
- Improve nutrition education in schools and early childhood settings
- Improve regulation to support mothers to breastfeed

**Health care**
- Support healthy pregnancy, breastfeeding, and physical activity in primary care settings

For the full list of interventions see the Evidence Check report on the Sax Institute [website](http://www.saxinstitute.org.au).

**Additional findings:**
- Settings-based strategies in places like schools, supermarkets, restaurants or workplaces were found to be effective when they included multiple components such as changes to the environment, building skills and knowledge and behaviour change initiatives.
- A comprehensive approach to obesity prevention incorporating a wide range of interventions will build on the relatively small effect likely from each intervention alone.
- Interventions that change the environment and involve broad-scale community action are likely to have a positive impact on equity.
What next?

The review concluded there is high-quality evidence and strong international and national consensus supporting a range of interventions that could contribute to obesity prevention. To address the complex determinants of obesity, a national coordinated approach across different sectors and levels of government is required. The mix of interventions should be considered to ensure positive equity impacts. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation will also be needed to both track progress and generate further evidence of effectiveness.

About Evidence Checks

An Evidence Check review is a synthesis, summary and analysis of the best and most relevant research evidence to inform policy making and program development. Evidence Check is used by a range of agencies, including government agencies, non-government organisations, and other policy making agencies.

About the Sax Institute

The Sax Institute is an independent, not-for-profit organisation and a national leader in driving the use of research evidence in policies and programs to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians. We have an international reputation as an evidence specialist, and have built up a near two-decade track record of innovation in helping decision-makers analyse and address health policy problems.