

 This Evidence Brief summarises the findings of an Evidence Check rapid review brokered by the Sax Institute

# Addressing the social and commercial determinants of healthy weight

## Summary

- A review of evidence was completed to identify the types of action that could be taken to address the social and commercial determinants of physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight
- Identified interventions were classified as either structural interventions or interventions to change people's daily living environment
- Structural interventions include: implementing welfare policy to support housing and food for people on low incomes; increasing the length of time in school; and improving the provision of public transport
- Interventions to improve daily living conditions include: parenting programs to improve nutrition and support during the early years of life; and investing in community social participation.

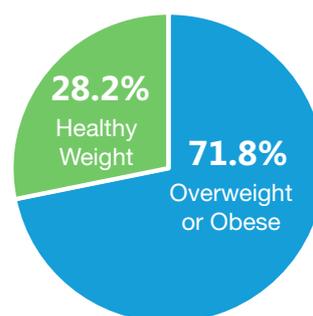
## What is the issue?

Eating healthy food and being physically active requires that people are empowered to make these options part of everyday life. It means that the healthy option must be physically, financially and socially the easiest and most desirable option to take, among all social groups. The empowerment of all to live healthy lives and pursue healthy behaviours is influenced by conditions of everyday life – those daily social experiences; physical environments; financial resources; and material living conditions – which together shape how people live their lives throughout the life course.

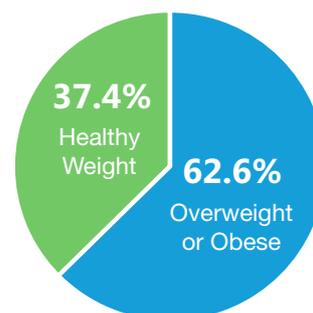
Promoting healthy weight also means tackling some of the economic, commercial and cultural factors (the structural determinants) that affect people's living conditions and their daily behaviour. This includes developing whole-of-government policies (e.g. social spending, trade agreements and foreign investment) that focus on the public interest and that ensure the needs of all social groups, and focusing attention on the commercial determinants of health (e.g. industry marketing, lobbying, corporate social responsibility strategies and food supply chains), and shifting societal norms and values surrounding physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight.

Figure 1. Socioeconomic link to overweight and obesity rates.

### Most disadvantaged groups



### Least disadvantaged groups



In Australia, **71.8%** of people in the **most disadvantaged** groups are overweight or obese compared with **62.6%** of people in the **least disadvantaged** groups.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. National Health Survey: First Results, 2017–18. Canberra: ABS; 2019.

## What did the review find?

The first aim of this review was to identify evidence related to the association between the social and commercial determinants of health and physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight. The second aim of this review was to identify interventions that modify the social or commercial determinants of health with the aim of improving healthy weight (or related behaviours). Social determinants of health that were found to be associated with healthy weight include:



### Socioeconomic status

Households and neighbourhoods with higher income, education and occupation status have healthier eating, higher rates of physical activity and lower levels of obesity than groups with low socio-economic status



### Support during the early years of life

The early childhood period is important for lifelong health; early development (school participation, basic learning) provides skills and resources that influence dietary behaviour, physical activity and obesity



### Access to green space and paths

The built environment plays an important role in enabling physical activity; for example, walking and cycling paths and access to green space both increase physical activity



### Working conditions

Long hours and an inflexible working environment are associated with lower physical activity levels; unemployment is associated more broadly with poor health outcomes, including poor mental health.



### Social participation

Supportive relationships, involvement in community activities, civic engagement and participation in decision making and implementation also play an important role in a healthy lifestyle; social connectedness is associated with lower obesity and social support is associated with higher levels of physical activity.

## What would make a difference?

Actions can occur at the structural level, such as welfare, education or transport policies. Actions at the structural level aim to address the distribution of money, power and resources across the population.

Effective interventions for physical activity or weight related outcomes include:

- Increasing the length of time in school
- Improving infrastructure to enable walking and cycling
- Improving the provision of public transport such as light rail and rapid bus transport (or providing financial incentives to encourage use)
- Improving the provision of food and rent subsidy programs.

Actions at the daily living level occur in households, neighbourhoods and settings and focus on improving access to foods and to opportunities to be physically active.

Effective interventions for physical activity or weight related outcomes within schools and communities include:

- Strategies such as community gardens that promote community engagement and inclusivity have positive effects on physical activity and healthy food intake
- Investing in community action to support social participation, such as setting up community advisory boards for disadvantaged groups, improves physical activity and healthy weight
- Providing holistic school programs and parenting skills programs helps improve the environment in which children are raised, which influences physical activity and healthy eating throughout the life course.

## What are some promising actions?

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The following actions show promise to address social and commercial determinants of healthy weight:

- Support autonomy and self-determination of policies and action by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Better collaboration between sectors dealing with unemployment, social protection and health
- Raise incomes of the poorest groups through social protection, minimum wages, and redistributive taxation
- Greater involvement of health interests in economic policy, including health impact assessment of trade agreements
- Limit the impact of commercial determinants of health through safeguards that monitor and/or regulate corporate activity in marketing and lobbying and manage conflicts of interest.

## What are the gaps?

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- There is limited review-level evidence about the effectiveness of interventions to address the social determinants of physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight
- Commercial determinants of health is a new field of research; the literature is predominantly early conceptual work
- Review-level evidence is limited for interventions on the social determinants of healthy weight among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

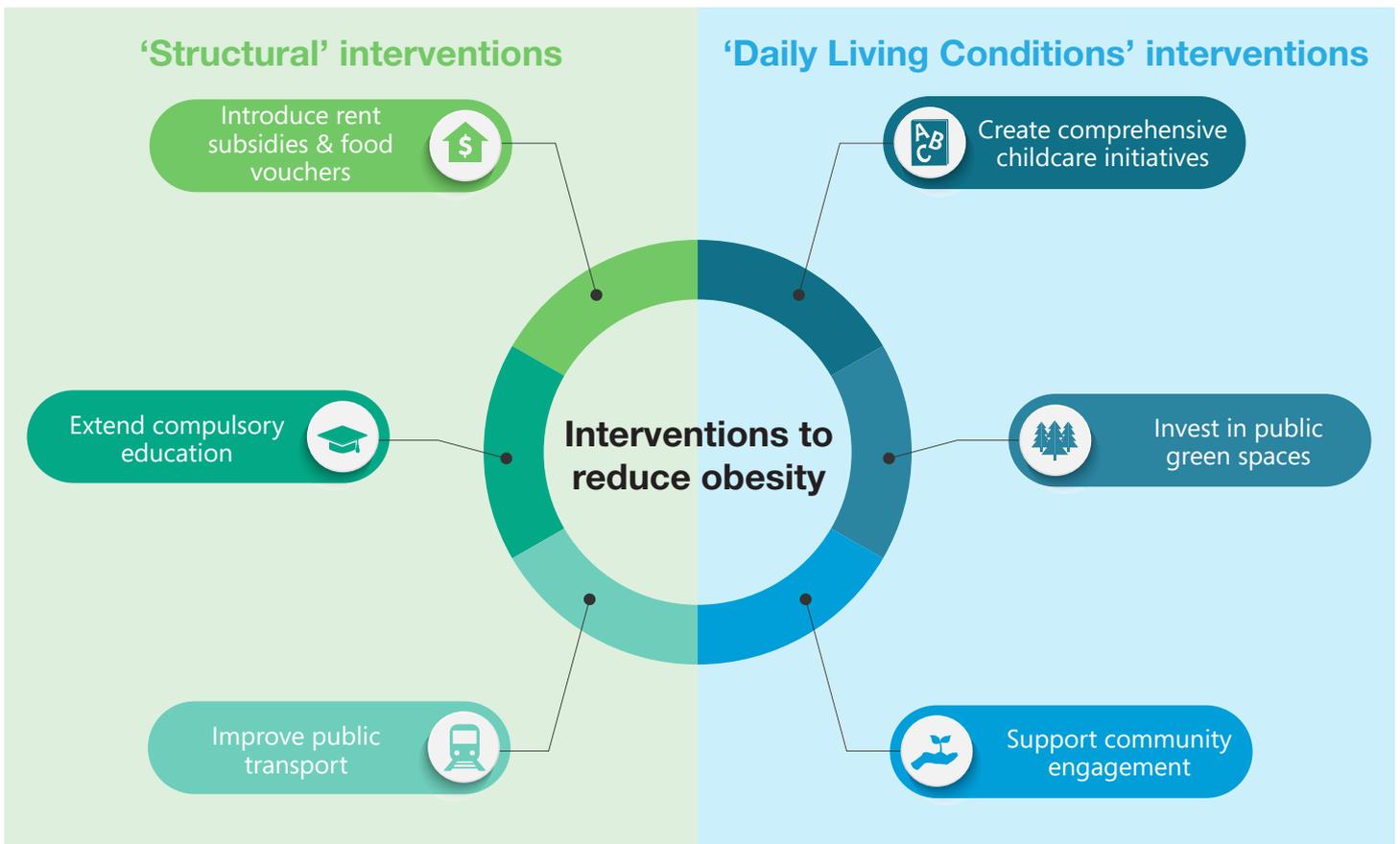
## Future research

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Research is required about:

- Strategies that address macroeconomic and socio-cultural values relating to healthy weight, physical activity and healthy eating
- Ways to limit the impact of commercial activities that promote products that may contribute to unhealthy weight gain.

Figure 2. Social determinants and commercial determinants of health interventions to reduce obesity:



## Conclusion

The social determinants of health must be acknowledged and addressed as contributing factors to healthy weight. Evidence exists to support interventions that target improvements to welfare, education, early childhood development, transport access, community infrastructure, and community engagement. Targeting the social and commercial determinants of health allows disadvantaged groups more opportunity to be physically active, eat healthy food and achieve a healthy weight.

The **Addressing the social factors behind overweight and obesity** Evidence Check was brokered by the Sax Institute for the Queensland Department of Health.

Friel S, Goldman S. Addressing the social and commercial determinants of healthy weight: an Evidence Check rapid review brokered by the Sax Institute ([www.saxinstitute.org.au](http://www.saxinstitute.org.au)) for Queensland Health, 2019.

## 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. It has an international reputation as an evidence specialist, and has built up a near two-decade track record of innovation in helping decision-makers analyse and address health policy problems.

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