



Action on Sugar

2015 MANIFESTO

**Eight practical recommendations
to prevent obesity and type 2
diabetes**

Introduction In the UK, 67% of men and 57% of women are either overweight or obese. More than a quarter of children are also overweight or obese – 26% of boys and 29% of girls¹. Obesity costs the NHS more than £5 billion every year, with an overall cost of almost £16 billion in 2007². If obesity rates were to continue unchecked, it is estimated that 60% of adult men, 50% of adult women, and 25% of children in the UK could be obese by 2050³, with a potential cost of around £50 billion.

The UK is facing a huge increase in type 2 diabetes. Since 2006 the number of people diagnosed with diabetes in England has increased from 1.9 million to 2.5 million. By 2025 it is estimated that five million people will have diabetes, most of which will be type 2 diabetes⁴. The rapidly growing scale of diabetes is alarming, as are the associated care and treatment costs. NHS spending on diabetes was almost £10 billion in 2011, or £1 million per hour, which is 10 per cent of the NHS budget. It is predicted that the annual NHS cost of the direct treatment of diabetes in the UK will increase to £16.9 billion over the next 25 years, which is 17 per cent of the NHS budget⁵, believed to potentially bankrupt the NHS.

Once people have become obese or develop type 2 diabetes, it is very difficult to reverse. Therefore it is vital to urgently adopt a well thought out strategic plan to prevent obesity and type 2 diabetes and to make sure it is rigorously enforced.

ACTION ON SUGAR ASKS THE NEXT GOVERNMENT TO:

1. Implement sugar reduction targets for food and drinks – 40% by 2020
2. Cease advertising and promotion of unhealthy foods and drinks to children and adolescents
3. Cease partnerships that imply increasing physical activity alone will prevent obesity
4. Reduce saturated fat
5. Limit the availability of unhealthy foods and drinks
6. Introduce a sugary drinks duty
7. Implement voluntary national colour coded front of pack labelling
8. Return responsibility for nutrition to an independent agency with statutory powers

“If the above **eight** actions are implemented, this will prevent both children and adults becoming obese and would be a fantastic opportunity for the UK to lead the world again in public health.”

Professor Graham MacGregor, Chairman of Action on Sugar

The underlying cause of obesity and type 2 diabetes is the food and drink environment

Obesity and type 2 diabetes is strongly linked to the constant availability and consumption of unhealthy foods and sugar-sweetened soft drinks. Government policies need to reflect the immediate need to create a healthy food environment to tackle the growing burden of obesity related ill health.

Sugar in the form of 'free sugars' is a major and unnecessary source of calories, which contribute directly to obesity, type 2 diabetes and tooth decay. The draft report from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) urges a reduction from the current recommendation of 10% of dietary energy intake to 5%: far below our current intakes⁶.

The constant availability, cheapness and overwhelming marketing of unhealthy foods and soft drinks have changed the food environment in the last 20 years, and efforts to control it have been weak and ineffectual. The UK requires policies that address the affordability, accessibility and availability of unhealthy foods and remove the disincentives to healthy food choices.

The obesity epidemic is preventable if the food environment is improved. Action on Sugar propose a coherent strategy that will prevent obesity.

Recommendation 1 - Implement sugar reduction targets for food and drinks – 40% by 2020

The UK has led the way in public health by working towards voluntary salt reduction targets, which is predicted to be saving at least 9,000 lives a year with just a 15% reduction in salt intakes across the population⁷. Taste receptors have adjusted and people are used to a less salty taste⁸.

The average consumption of added sugar far exceeds the current recommendation of no more than 10% food energy for all age groups, most notably for children aged 1.5 to 3, 4 to 10 and 11 to 18 years where average intakes provided 11.9% (144kcal), 14.7% (253kcal) and 15.6% (297kcal) food energy respectively⁹.

An average of 100kcal/person/day could be removed from the diet by meeting sugar reduction targets set for each category of food and drink that contains free sugars. By gradual reductions of ~10% each year, we could aim for a ~40% reduction from current levels by 2020. This amount is predicted by the Department of Health to halt the rise in obesity¹⁰.

We recommend that sugar reduction targets are set for sugar-sweetened drinks first, followed by all the contributors of free sugars in the diet, preferably to be achieved without artificial sweeteners. This policy would particularly benefit those from lower income households who currently consume more free sugars than those in higher income households¹¹.

“Rising obesity and diabetes will soon cost the UK economy over £50 billion every year. However, reformulating junk food with less sugar could halt the obesity epidemic. AND reformulation would cost the food industry almost nothing. It’s a no-brainer.”

**Professor Simon Capewell
University of Liverpool**

Recommendation 2 – Cease advertising and promotion of unhealthy foods and drinks to children and adolescents under 16

There is a clear association between food and drink marketing and the rise in childhood and adolescent obesity. Currently in the UK, broadcast (above the line) advertising continues to be the most dominant promotional channel of unhealthy food promotion. Current restrictions clearly do not go far enough, and allow for loopholes to be exploited. Within the non-broadcast media such as the internet (below the line), there are currently no legal restrictions on unhealthy food marketing aimed at children let alone risk prone adolescents¹².

Action on Sugar recommend a total ban on advertising and marketing, both above and below the line, of unhealthy foods that are high in saturated fats, sugar and salt, and sugar-sweetened soft drinks as defined by the current FSA/Ofcom nutrient profiling model, to protect children and adolescents. This should be monitored and enforced by a body independent of the advertising industry, and not funded by the food industry.

“We need to shift the mix of foods advertised to children to encourage healthier dietary choices and lifestyles. Big Food must be regulated, to prevent excesses and protect the public good.”

**Professor Peter Sever
Imperial College London**

Recommendation 3 – Cease partnerships that imply increasing physical activity alone will prevent obesity

It is unfortunately widely accepted amongst the lay public and media that consuming more calories than we burn is the cause of the obesity epidemic, and thus the population-based solution is simply to do more exercise. This advice is incorrect. Obesity is due to eating too many calories, particularly food and soft drinks that give minimal feeling of satiety or fullness¹³.

Regular physical activity does have very beneficial effects but there has been little change if any in our levels of physical activity in the past three decades, whilst levels of obesity have escalated¹⁴.

In recent years many food and drink companies have deliberately and pervasively pushed the physical activity message via inappropriate associations. Companies that are responsible for the obesity epidemic sponsor major sporting events e.g. the Olympics. Allowing the association of unhealthy food and soft drinks with sport and sport celebrity endorsement is wrong and gives the wrong message, particularly to children and adolescents under 16.

“Exercise alone will not protect you from the damaging health effects of junk food. A child eating a burger and chips, washed down with a sugary drink, followed by a bar of chocolate and crisps, would need to run half a marathon to burn off the calories consumed.”

**Dr Aseem Malhotra
Action on Sugar**

Recommendation 4 – Reduce saturated fat

Saturated fat is a major source of calorie intake and will therefore be an important part of any plan to reduce obesity. Saturated fat is also the major factor controlling cholesterol levels, a leading cause of death, through the vascular disease it causes, which leads to both strokes and heart attacks and peripheral vascular disease. Action on Sugar proposes an incremental saturated fat reduction programme similar to the salt and sugar reduction programme, to reduce saturated fat, where possible, by 15% from current levels by 2020.

The current saturated fat pledge is not nearly sufficient to address this issue. As for sugar, progressive saturated fat reduction targets need to be set and implemented by the next government.

"Saturated fat is a major ingredient in manufactured foods that contributes to the global epidemic of cardiovascular disease. Urgent action is needed to reduce the consumption of saturated fat."

**Professor Sir Nicholas Wald
The Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine**

Recommendation 5 - Limit the availability of unhealthy foods and drinks

Environments including retail outlets and public institutions such as hospitals and leisure centres are often designed to entice children and parents to make unhealthy food choices.

A recent survey of approximately 2,000 adults in the UK showed that 83% have been pestered by their children to buy unhealthy food and drinks at the checkouts and 75% of those parents had given in to their children and purchased something¹⁵.

Legislating to limit foods high in fat, sugar and salt (as defined by the Ofcom nutrient profiling model) will create a level playing field. This policy would mean that retailers and other institutions would have to stop undermining parents' efforts to give their children a healthy diet. Public opinion shows this would also be beneficial to retailers, as 56% of people would more likely shop at a supermarket if it were to ban unhealthy food at the checkouts¹⁶.

Provided this was properly enforced using legislation, it would ensure a level playing field and no reason for a business not to comply.

“Tooth decay, caused by sugars, is one of the most common and costly health problems. The widespread availability of sugars leads to much toothache and suffering. Sugars should therefore be an occasional treat.”

**Emeritus Professor Aubrey Sheiham
University College London**

Recommendation 6 –Introduce a sugary drinks duty

The cheap and abundant availability of highly calorific foods compared with the relative affordability and restricted availability of unhealthy foods; provide a strong financial disincentive to individuals pursuing a healthy diet. This is particularly the case with the more socially-deprived people, who eat less fruit and vegetables and die, on average, approximately 15 years before those who are better educated; predominantly from premature cardiovascular disease¹⁷.

As such, a sugar-sweetened beverages duty should be introduced, and other foods such as confectionary should also be considered, both as a lever to support behaviour change and as a means for raising revenue for public health interventions, such as via the Children’s Health Fund, as proposed by Sustain and Citizen’s UK. A 20p per litre excise duty would in itself reduce consumption of sugar, but also raise around £1 billion in taxation revenue which should be ring-fenced for policies to promote children’s health and wellbeing¹⁸. A 20p per litre duty, at current consumption levels, would amount to £15 per year, or just 4p per day.

Although we understand concerns that a duty could be regressive, we recognise that poorer consumers will respond and benefit much more, so on balance; this ‘regressive’ measure will help to improve their significantly shorter life expectancy (10-15 years).

“Because sugary drinks do not provide any beneficial nutrition, there are no down sides to reducing consumption levels using pricing measures.”

**Professor Mike Rayner
University of Oxford**

Recommendation 7 – Implement national colour coded front of pack labelling

Consistent front-of-pack labelling helps people make informed and healthy choices¹⁹. Research shows the ‘hybrid label’; colour-coded labels (‘traffic lights’) alongside percentage Reference Intakes, is one of the most effective ways to communicate nutrition information to all societal groups. The Department of Health have recommended UK manufacturers use the hybrid scheme since 2013²⁰, and Food Information Regulations (FIR) will be EU food law as of this December. As the recommendations are voluntary, take-up is inconsistent, leaving customers in the dark.

Much more needs to be done to promote and encourage all manufacturers to implement the scheme, for example, by making the labelling scheme mandatory, or by encouraging retailers to only stock compliant manufacturers. Only universal drive by government and a consistent use of the scheme across all food producers and retailers will enable customers to make a healthy choice.

An additional benefit to colour-coded labelling is that, as manufacturers want their products to be seen in the best possible light, they are more likely to reformulate products that would otherwise receive a ‘red’ label. As thousands of food and drink products are reformulated and relabelled every year; universal labelling would have a huge impact on our diet.

“A healthy diet is good for everybody, and can reduce the risk of obesity-related diseases, including many cancers. We seriously question any company’s commitment to their customer’s health that doesn’t provide clear front of pack labelling”

**Professor Jack Cuzick
Queen Mary University of London**

Recommendation 8 – Return responsibility for nutrition to an independent agency with statutory powers

As nutrition is now the major cause of death and disability in the UK, it is vital that responsibility for nutrition is handed back to an independent agency that can carry out a scientifically-backed programme which is not subject to constant change, and political interference.

Responsibility for nutrition was removed from the respected Food Standards Agency to the Department of Health in 2010. The Food Network Responsibility Deal has not worked, brings the Department of Health into disrepute and supermarkets do not regard it as fit for purpose. Competitive industries can prosper effectively only with a level playing field but current policies and the absence of proper policing without any sanctions allows the more irresponsible manufacturers to sabotage willing and responsible supermarkets and other companies.

Very little progress has been made over the last 4-5 years, which is a tragedy given the fact that by far the biggest cause of death and disability in the UK is due to the food we eat, through its very high salt, sugar and fat content and the lack of fruit and vegetables. It is therefore vital that a much more robust and responsible mechanism is re-established. The agency for nutrition must have regulatory powers to penalise non-compliant food and drink companies.

“The Food Standards Agency was considered the premier public health body in the world. That nutrition analyses and proposals are no longer independent is a major setback for the health of the nation.”

**Professor Philip James
The London School of Tropical Hygiene and Medicine**

Summary

The UK can lead the world again in nutrition policy, and be the first country in the world to reverse the obesity and type 2 diabetes epidemic.

Obesity and type 2 diabetes is totally preventable if the food environment is changed, yet the current policies are not working. We require policies that set public health-based standards for the food supply; address the affordability of unhealthy foods; and remove the disincentives to healthy food choices.

We need these policies to be adopted immediately and with forceful leadership from government.

Action on Sugar

Action on Sugar is a group of specialists concerned with sugar and its effects on health. It is working to reach a consensus with the food industry and Government over the harmful effects of a high sugar diet, and bring about a reduction in the amount of sugar in processed foods. Action on Sugar is supported by 24 expert advisors.

Get in touch

We welcome your comments and feedback.

If you would like to discuss further, please contact Katharine Jenner, Campaign Director at:

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