

The Public Health England report on sugar: What's it all about?

Public Health England's (PHE) 'Sugar reduction: the evidence for action' report was released in October 2015. It discussed the evidence, problems and actions needed to counter the growing issue of high-sugar consumption in the UK.

What is the problem?

Nearly one in four adults in the UK are obese, resulting in health problems and treatments costing the NHS £5.1bn each year. The report highlights how excessive sugar consumption is contributing to the epidemic levels of obesity and outlines comprehensive policies that could dramatically improve the health of the UK population. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition concluded that average sugar intake should not be greater than five per cent of total dietary energy. If the consumption of sugar is reduced to target levels within the next five years, 4,700 lives and £576m could be saved annually.

Key messages - the drivers of obesity

PHE advocates the introduction of a clear definition of high sugar food and drink as one of eight key recommendations. These recommendations tackle four areas which are seen as the main drivers of obesity.

Supply

Supplies of cheap, high-sugar food and drink have multiplied. As a result, PHE recommends new standards for the catering and supply of food across the public sector, including hospitals, with the aim of implementing a programme to reduce portion sizes and sugar content.



Education and knowledge

PHE recommends that accredited food and diet training is offered to all potential influencers of food choices. This includes individuals in various service industry positions, from caterers to leisure centre staff. Healthcare professionals in particular should offer patients practical steps to reduce their sugar intake.



Marketing

High spending on advertising and marketing of unhealthy foods drives unhealthy consumer behaviours. A significant proportion of this advertising targets children. The report recommends limiting opportunities for this advertising and reducing the scale of unhealthy food price promotions.



Cost

Unhealthy foods tend to be low-cost and regular discounts make them even more attractive to consumers. Levying a 10 - 20 per cent tax on food and drink containing high levels of sugar is thought to be the best way to reduce their consumption. Since the report, the Welsh government and UK parliamentarians have backed this initiative.



How does this affect me?

The report places a responsibility on health professionals to provide practical steps to help patients lower their sugar intake. Increasing education and knowledge at every opportunity is key to reducing overall sugar intake, thereby reducing obesity and its consequences, and ultimately saving lives. Training and support for all professionals will be improved and PHE is working with the RCGP to produce an e-learning module on this topic.

Further responses to the report

BMJ [2015]: *Public Health England's report on sugar reduction* <http://www.bmj.com/content/351/bmj.h6095>

The Economist [2015]: *Stopping slurping Taxes on fizzy drinks seem to work as intended* <http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21679259-taxes-fizzy-drinks-seem-work-intended-stopping-slurping>

BBC [2015]: *Tax on sugary drinks backed by MPs* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-34948410>

Health Select Committee [2015]: *Childhood obesity-brave and bold action report* <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmhealth/465/46502.htm>

BMJ [2015]: *Head to Head. Could a sugar tax help combat obesity?* <http://www.bmj.com/content/351/bmj.h4047.long>