



## **FORESIGHT**

Tackling Obesities:  
Future Choices –  
Summary of Key Messages

**Government Office for Science**

# Tackling Obesity: Future Choices – Summary of Key Messages

By looking ahead 40 years, using scientific evidence, commissioned research and expert advice, the Foresight project, 'Tackling Obesity: Future Choices' has taken a strategic view of the issue of obesity.

In recent years Britain has become a nation where overweight is the norm. The rate of increase in overweight and obesity, in children and adults, is striking. By 2050, Foresight modelling indicates that 60% of adult men, 50% of adult women and about 25% of all children under 16 could be obese. Obesity increases the risk of a range of chronic diseases, particularly type 2 diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease and also cancer and arthritis. The NHS costs attributable to overweight and obesity are projected to double to £10 billion per year by 2050. The wider costs to society and business are estimated to reach £49.9 billion per year (at today's prices).

The causes of obesity are extremely complex encompassing biology and behaviour, but set within a cultural, environmental and social framework. There is compelling evidence that humans are predisposed to put on weight by their biology. This has previously been concealed in all but a few but exposure to modern lifestyles has revealed it in the majority. Although personal responsibility plays a crucial part in weight gain, human biology is being overwhelmed by the effects of today's 'obesogenic' environment, with its abundance of energy dense food, motorised transport and sedentary lifestyles. As a result, the people of the UK are inexorably becoming heavier simply by living in the Britain of today. This process has been coined 'passive obesity'. Some members of the population, including the most disadvantaged, are especially vulnerable to the conditions.

Successfully tackling obesity is a long term, large scale commitment. The current prevalence of obesity in the population has been at least 30 years in the making. This will take time to reverse and it will be at least 30 years before reductions in the associated diseases are seen. The evidence is very clear that policies aimed solely at individuals will be inadequate and that simply increasing the number or type of small scale interventions will not be sufficient to reverse this trend. Significant effective action to prevent obesity at a population level is required.

Foresight's work indicates that a bold whole system approach is critical - from production and promotion of healthy diets to redesigning the built environment to promote walking, together with wider cultural changes to shift societal values around food and activity. This will require a broad set of integrated policies including both population and targeted measures and must necessarily include action not only by government, both central and local, but also action by industry, communities, families and society as a whole.

Tackling obesity has striking similarities with tackling climate change. Both need whole societal change with cross governmental action and long term commitment. Many climate change goals would also help prevent obesity, such as measures to reduce traffic congestion, increase cycling or design sustainable communities. Tackling them together would enhance the effectiveness of action. There are also synergies with other policy goals such as increasing social inclusion and narrowing health inequalities since obesity's impact is greatest on the poorest. No other country yet has an integrated, whole system approach to the prevention of obesity. Yet, based on the UK's strengths in research, surveillance and public health there is an opportunity to pioneer a new approach that sets the global standards for success.

**This Foresight project has taken a strategic 40 year forward look at how society could respond sustainably to obesity:**

- Most adults in the UK are already overweight. Modern living ensures every generation is heavier than the last – 'Passive Obesity'.
- By 2050 60% of men and 50% of women could be clinically obese. Without action, obesity-related diseases are estimated to cost society £49.9 billion per year.
- The obesity epidemic cannot be prevented by individual action alone and demands a societal approach.
- Tackling obesity requires far greater change than anything tried so far, and at multiple levels: personal, family, community and national.
- Preventing obesity is a societal challenge, similar to climate change. It requires partnership between government, science, business and civil society.

