

# Experts highlight big gaps in healthy food policies

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Healthy food policies to promote childhood health and reduce obesity are lacking, according to a report highlighting the policy priorities assessed by an expert panel of more than 50 New Zealand public health professionals, medical practitioners and NGO leaders.

The panel reviewed all the evidence on recent government actions and rated the degree of implementation compared to international benchmarks.

They also identified the top priority recommendations for government to fill these implementation gaps.

The unique report card is the first systematic study on national food policies in the world and it showed that, while there were some strengths, there were a large number of healthy food policies that still need to be implemented in New Zealand.

In the report released today, global health expert, Professor Boyd Swinburn from the University of Auckland, says of major concern was the large number of food policies that were rated as having 'very little, if any, implementation'.

"These were especially apparent in the areas of reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and using fiscal policies, like taxes on sugary drinks, to influence food choices.," he says.

"There is also no overall plan to improve population nutrition and reduce obesity, yet unhealthy diets are the biggest preventable cause of disease and New Zealand has one of the highest rates of obesity in OECD countries."

The report presents the results of a study assessing the New Zealand government's level of implementation of policies and infrastructure support that are considered international good practice for improving the healthiness of [food environments](#).

The panel of experts also identified actions for the New Zealand Government to improve food environments and contribute to a reduction in obesity and diet-related diseases.

Professor Swinburn says that the top priority is to develop a comprehensive plan to address food and diet to set a target to reduce [childhood obesity](#).

"The Healthy Eating Healthy Action plan was prematurely terminated along with its funding and evaluation in 2010 and there is an urgent need to replace it with a subsequent plan," he says.

"New Zealand will be expected to report to WHO in 2015 that it has a fully funded, comprehensive plan to reduce non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes, cancers and cardiovascular diseases."

"New Zealand will also be expected to report on progress on reducing marketing of unhealthy food to children because this is one of the 25 core indicators in WHO NCD Monitoring Plan," says Professor Swinburn. "This lack of government interest in protecting children from commercial exploitation will not be considered acceptable progress for a high income, high capacity country with one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the world."

He says New Zealand has an excellent opportunity to take the prevention of obesity and diet-related NCDs seriously and invest in highly cost-effective policies and programs to become a leader in the field.

"It will clearly require a much greater government effort than has recently been evident. Priority recommendations from New Zealand's public health experts are proposed. All of them are achievable with sufficient government commitment."

"None of the recommendations are outside the bounds of what is feasible in a developed country, what is reasonable for a responsible government, and what is expected from a New Zealand public which cares about its health and the health of its children," says Professor Swinburn.

The recommendations to improve the healthiness of food environments are to:

- Implement a comprehensive national action plan
- Set priorities in Statements of Intent and set targets for
  - reducing childhood and adolescent obesity
  - reducing salt, sugar and saturated fat intake
  - food composition (salt and saturated fat) in key food groups
- Increase funding for population nutrition promotion, doubling it to at least \$70m/year
- Reduce the promotion of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents by
  - Restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents through broadcast and non-broadcast media
- Ensuring schools and [early childhood education](#) and care services are free of commercial promotion of unhealthy foods
- Ensure that food provided in or sold by schools and early childhood education and care (ECE) services meets dietary

guidelines

- Implement the Health Star Rating system, making it mandatory in two years if a voluntary approach does not achieve widespread uptake
- Introduce an excise tax of at least 20 per cent on sugar-sweetened beverages.

The implementation of priority policies and infrastructure support assessment showed some areas of strength.

"New Zealand and Australia have set the international benchmark in one area by applying a nutrient profiling system to prevent [unhealthy foods](#) from making any health claims," says Professor Swinburn. "New Zealand is also at world standard, along with many other high income countries, in requiring nutrition information panels on packaged foods, having good monitoring systems for NCDs and their risk factors, and having high levels of transparency and access to government information."

He says, some initiatives are underway and showing good progress, such as reducing trans fats in foods, having food-based dietary guidelines and some support systems for settings to establish healthy [food](#) service policies.

"Implementation of front of pack labelling (Health Star Ratings) and developing a systems approach to community-based efforts (Healthy Families NZ) were both rated at low implementation, but because the government has already started developing these initiatives, they have the potential to rapidly increase in implementation," says Professor Swinburn.

The report from the University of Auckland was part of the work by the INFORMAS network to develop the first Healthy Food Environment

Policy Index (Food-EPI).

Provided by University of Auckland

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