

Tackling obesity needs all of us, not some of us

April 12 2016, by Atif Kukaswadia, PhD

One of the most important issues facing public health today is obesity. Worldwide, approximately 30% of adults are obese, and costs around \$2 trillion annually. A health concern with complex determinants and many intertwined causes, there's no single magic bullet solution to the rising prevalence of obesity. A new report by the McKinsey Global Institute studied 74 interventions to see what was effective. They studied 74 interventions that target obesity, which range from subsidizing school meals, adding calorie and nutrition labels, as well as restrictions on advertising high-calorie food and drinks.

The report covers areas one would expect, such as energy balance and changing dietary and physical activity behaviours. While these issues are important and do require study, the authors also looked at the environment and how that impacts [obesity](#). There's a lot of literature that shows that your environment plays a large role in obesity, and simply telling someone to "eat less and move more" is an ineffective strategy at best, and one that further stigmatizes at worst. It's something we've discussed in relation to [poverty](#), and illustrated with the retailer [IKEA](#).

The main findings of the discussion paper were:

While they did find that personal responsibility is important, interventions also need to change the environment and tackle societal norms. Decreasing portion sizes, tackling how products are marketed, and changing the physical environment are all avenues that can and should be explored as a way to improve health.

There's no single solution. We need to have prolonged action, driven by evidence, in order to see changes.

While some may be skeptical of how these will be funded, they found that almost all the interventions ended up saving money through decreased healthcare costs and higher productivity. They hypothesize that such an intervention could save the National Health Service in the UK about \$1.2 billion a year.

We can't tackle obesity by going at it alone. We need to get everyone on board, pulling in the same direction to reverse these trends. In particular, we need partnerships between public and private businesses, as well as the communities they serve, in order to change [public health](#) outcomes (for more on this, see [this post](#) by Jenn Lau)

They then set four important issues that any intervention aimed at tackling obesity should consider:

Interventions should bring as many sectors as possible together, in order to ensure success

The interests of government and business will need to be aligned, and this requires specific attention Interventions shouldn't be unduly prioritized as this could prevent action from occurring. Doing something is better than doing nothing.

To combat the rising prevalence of obesity, we need to do something. Reports such as these can amalgamate what everyone is doing, look for what is working and what isn't, and this can be used to to inform future interventions on what should be done.

More information: The report is available online:
www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business

%20Functions/Economic%20Studies%20TEMP/Our%20Insights/How
%20the%20world%20could%20better%20fight%20obesity/MGI_Overc
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Citation: Tackling obesity needs all of us, not some of us (2016, April 12) retrieved 2 May 2024
from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-04-tackling-obesity.html>

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