Sugar fixation hampering obesity battle

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New guidance on sugary foods

Public debate around obesity has become dangerously fixated with sugar, according to one of the UK's leading experts on obesity and diabetes.

Responding to the latest NHS statistics showing that obesity prevalence in adults increased from 15 percent in 1993 to 27 percent and that over

one in three children leaving primary school were measured as obese or overweight in 2015, Dr James Brown from the School of Life and Health Sciences at Aston University, Birmingham, said a multi-pronged approach was needed to tackle the UK's worrying levels of overweight and obesity, arguing that the upcoming sugar tax on soft drinks and new guidance on sugary foods was "not a silver bullet".

Public Health England (PHE) today published new guidelines which call on food manufacturers to reduce the sugar content of foods including breakfast cereals, yoghurts, biscuits and ice creams by 20 per cent by 2020.

But Dr Brown pointed to the so-called 'Australian Paradox', first identified in research in 2013, that showed that although Australians significantly cut their sugar consumption between 1980 and 2010, obesity rates trebled over the same period.

The new figures show that obesity rates have stayed broadly consistent over the past decade, with around a quarter of British adults and a third of children leaving primary school falling into this category.

But Dr Brown said there was no room for complacency because obesity already put immense strain on the NHS, while childhood obesity levels not seen in previous generations were storing up problems for the future. According to Public Health England, the direct costs to the NHS of treating overweight and obesity and related illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease is estimated to be around £6.3 billion, with wider indirect costs as high as £27 billion.

Dr Brown is currently leading research at Aston University focused around obese bariatric surgery patients to identify what role hormones, enzymes and chemicals secreted by their fat cells play in increasing their risk of heart disease.

Dr Brown, who has provided expert opinion for TV health programmes including BBC's Trust Me I'm a Doctor and TheTruth About... and Channel 4's How to Lose Weight Well, said:

"For 30 years we were told fat in our diet was the enemy. In the last few years this has shifted towards a dangerous fixation with sugar to the exclusion of other factors, evidenced by the government's planned sugar tax on soft drinks and today's new guidance from PHE. But put simply, this is not a silver bullet.

"The evidence to show that sugar is responsible for rising obesity at the population level is actually quite weak, as demonstrated by the work looking at the relationship between the two in Australia.

"Clearly, consuming too much sugar is bad for you. But the real message we need to keep reinforcing is that consuming too many calories generally is bad for you. Research has shown that Britons underestimate how much they're eating by an average of 1,000 calories a day.

"Rather than a simple, reductive answer we need to be thinking on so many different levels about how to tackle this huge problem. This must start with how we teach kids about food in our schools, so that we're educating them about nutrition, energy content and food preparation.

"But we also need to confront the 'obesogenic environments' we've created that surround us with influences encouraging us to over-eat and under-exercise. So we should be much tougher on shops selling junk food near schools, limit the number of takeaways on our high streets and engineer our city centres so that there are fewer escalators so that we're all incentivised to be more active."

Provided by Aston University

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