

Ireland falling behind on measures to improve food habits

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Ireland falls behind international best practice for implementing some of the policies needed to tackle obesity and other non-communicable diseases, a ground-breaking new report from University College Cork

has found.

Its findings have led to calls for a reform of Ireland's food environment—the wide range of interconnected factors such as food production, processing, marketing, and distribution, that characterize our [food system](#) and largely determine our dietary intakes.

The first Irish Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) has highlighted how Ireland compared poorly with other countries when it comes to rolling out initiatives such as so-called "no fry zones," school food policies, and measures aimed at reducing the marketing of unhealthy food to children in the media and online.

The Food-EPI Ireland study is led by Dr. Janas Harrington at UCC's School of Public Health, and is the first of its kind to benchmark the Irish Government's level of support for improving the healthiness of the food environment against international best practice.

The report was conducted as part of a wider European project, the Policy Evaluation Network (PEN) in collaboration with research groups from countries such as The Netherlands, Norway, Germany, Poland and New Zealand.

It compared the Irish food environment to international standards, and found that Ireland rates well in ensuring the public has access to nutritional information and key documents through freedom of information legislation. It also found Ireland is also at international best practice in monitoring overweight and obesity prevalence in the population and occurrence rates for the main diet-related disease and its risk factors. Ireland also rated well for implementing procedures to support evidence-informed policymaking.

- However it found Ireland lags behind international best practice

when it comes to

- marketing unhealthy food to children
- the implementation of 'no fry zones'
- the use of fiscal policies to support healthy food choices,
- providing support for companies to provide healthy eating options to employees
- the roll-out of evidence-informed labeling for front-of-pack
- the need for food composition targets/standards for processed foods.

Four implementation gaps were identified relating to [government policy](#) on key aspects of the [food environment](#):

- a lack of government action on the introduction of targets for out-of-home meals,
- failure to restrict the promotion of unhealthy foods to children on food packaging
- no discernible progress towards establishing public sector procurement standards for food service activities to provide and promote healthy food choices,
- failure to implement policies that encourage availability of outlets selling nutritious foods.

"The government needs to seize an opportunity to improve the diets of the Irish population, prevent obesity and diet-related non communicable diseases by investing in the kind of policies and programs which have demonstrated success in a number of countries," Dr. Harrington said.

"The benefits are two-fold—aside from improving the health of the general population, these measures are highly cost effective, and in the long-run can help counteract the rising healthcare costs associated with obesity and diet-related non communicable diseases," she said.

Five priority [policy](#) recommendations arising from the report calls for:

- nutritional standards for schools including tuck shops,
- the establishment of a committee to monitor and evaluate food-related income support programs for vulnerable population groups,
- the ring-fencing of tax on unhealth food to subsidize healthy options for disadvantaged groups in the community,
- the introduction of "No Fry Zone" planning legislation to prohibit the placement of unhealthy food outlets within 400m of primary and secondary schools,
- the implementation of a comprehensive policy on nutrition standards for [food](#) and beverage provision in the public sector.

The Food-EPI is an initiative of the INFORMAS Network (International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support) and was conducted between January 2018 to June 2020 with a panel of independent and government [public health](#) experts.

The expert panel consisted of 20 representatives from academia, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Safefood, HSE, and charity organizations.

Provided by University College Cork

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