

# From banning junk food ads to a sugar tax: With diabetes on the rise, Australia can't afford to ignore the evidence

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There are renewed calls this week for the Australian government to implement a range of measures aimed at improving our diets. These include restrictions on junk food advertising, improvements to food labeling, and a levy on sugary drinks.

This time the recommendations come from a [parliamentary inquiry](#) into diabetes in Australia. Its [final report](#), tabled in parliament on Wednesday, was prepared by a [parliamentary committee](#) comprising members from across the political spectrum.

The release of this [report](#) could be an indication that Australia is finally going to implement the evidence-based healthy eating policies [public health experts](#) have been [recommending](#) for years.

But we know Australian governments have historically been [unwilling](#) to introduce policies the powerful food industry opposes. The question is whether the current government will put the health of Australians above the profits of companies selling unhealthy food.

## Diabetes in Australia

Diabetes is one of the fastest growing chronic health conditions in the nation, with more than [1.3 million people affected](#). [Projections](#) show the number of Australians diagnosed with the condition is set to rise rapidly in coming decades.

Type 2 diabetes accounts for the vast majority of cases of diabetes. It's

largely preventable, with [obesity](#) among the strongest risk factors.

This latest report makes it clear we need an urgent focus on [obesity prevention](#) to reduce the burden of diabetes. Type 2 diabetes and obesity cost the Australian economy [billions of dollars](#) each year and preventive solutions are highly [cost-effective](#).

This means the money spent on preventing obesity and diabetes would [save the government](#) huge amounts in [health care costs](#). Prevention is also essential to avoid our health systems being overwhelmed in the future.

## **What does the report recommend?**

The [report](#) puts forward 23 recommendations for addressing diabetes and obesity. These include:

- restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy foods to children, including on TV and online
- improvements to food labeling that would make it easier for people to understand products' added sugar content
- a levy on sugary drinks, where products with higher sugar content would be taxed at a higher rate (commonly called a sugar tax).

These key recommendations echo those prioritized in a range of [reports on obesity prevention](#) over the past decade. There's [compelling evidence](#) they're likely to work.

## **Restrictions on unhealthy food marketing**

There was universal support from the committee for the government to consider regulating marketing of unhealthy food to children.

Public health groups have consistently [called](#) for comprehensive mandatory legislation to protect children from exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods and related brands.

An increasing number of countries, including [Chile](#) and [the United Kingdom](#), have legislated unhealthy food marketing restrictions across a range of settings including on TV, online and in supermarkets. There's [evidence](#) comprehensive policies like these are having positive results.

In Australia, the food industry has made [voluntary commitments](#) to reduce some unhealthy food ads directly targeting children. But these promises are widely viewed as [ineffective](#).

The government is currently conducting a [feasibility study](#) on additional options to limit [unhealthy food](#) marketing to children.

But the effectiveness of any new policies will depend on how comprehensive they are. Food companies are likely to rapidly shift their [marketing techniques](#) to maximize their impact. If any new government restrictions do not include all marketing channels (such as TV, online and on packaging) and techniques (including both product and brand marketing), they're likely to fail to adequately protect children.

## **Food labeling**

Food [regulatory authorities](#) are currently considering a [range](#) of improvements to food labeling in Australia.

For example, food ministers in Australia and New Zealand are soon set to [consider](#) mandating the health star rating front-of-pack labeling scheme.

Public health groups have [consistently recommended](#) mandatory

implementation of health star ratings as a priority for improving Australian diets. Such changes are likely to result in [meaningful improvements](#) to the healthiness of what we eat.

Regulators are also [reviewing](#) potential changes to how added sugar is labeled on product packages. The recommendation from the committee to include added sugar labeling on the front of product packaging is likely to support this ongoing work.

But changes to food labeling laws are notoriously slow in Australia. And food companies are [known](#) to oppose and delay any policy changes that might hurt their profits.

## **A sugary drinks tax**

Of the report's 23 recommendations, the sugary drinks levy was the only one that wasn't universally supported by the committee. The four Liberal and National party members of the committee opposed implementation of this policy.

As part of their rationale, the dissenting members [cited](#) submissions from food industry groups that argued against the measure. This follows a long history of the Liberal party [siding](#) with the sugary drinks industry to oppose a levy on their products.

The dissenting members didn't acknowledge the [strong evidence](#) that a sugary drinks levy has worked as intended in a wide range of countries.

In the UK, for example, a levy on sugary drinks implemented in 2018 has successfully lowered the [sugar content](#) in UK soft drinks and reduced [sugar consumption](#).

The dissenting committee members argued a [sugary drinks](#) levy would

hurt families on lower incomes. But [previous Australian modeling](#) has shown the two most disadvantaged quintiles would reap the greatest health benefits from such a levy, and accrue the highest savings in health-care costs.

## What happens now?

Improvements to population diets and prevention of obesity will require a [comprehensive and coordinated package](#) of policy reforms.

Globally, a range of countries facing rising epidemics of obesity and diabetes are starting to take such strong preventive action.

In Australia, after years of inaction, this week's report is the latest sign that long-awaited policy change may be near.

But meaningful and effective policy change will require politicians to listen to the public health evidence rather than the protestations of food companies concerned about their bottom line.

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