

Levels of obesity could rise if effective actions are not taken in childhood

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The number of adults living with obesity could rise dramatically unless robust measures are implemented to halt childhood obesity.

The STOP Project (Science and Technology in [childhood](#) Obesity Policy), funded in 2018 by the European Commission to identify new interventions to reduce [childhood obesity](#) in Europe, has released its latest findings, providing new evidence to support governments and help [policy makers](#) identify the most effective childhood obesity interventions.

With over 375 million children affected worldwide, obesity has risen to the top of the public health policy agenda in countries at all levels of income and development.

Often moralized as being an individual or parental failure, childhood obesity is predominantly driven by commercial and biological forces beyond people's control. The message of the report is clear: innovative interventions are urgently needed to halt the childhood obesity epidemic.

Professor Franco Sassi, Director of the Centre for Health Economics & Policy Innovation at Imperial College Business School and leader of the project said: "In the United Kingdom, one in ten children live with obesity, one of the highest rates in Europe. If no effective action is taken, this wave of childhood obesity will lead to more than one in three adults aged 20 in the UK being obese by 2025."

According to the report, children spend half of their time and consume at least one third of their daily calories at school. The authors ask whether modifying schools' food and physical environments could help the situation. The findings show that schools can help shape healthy nutrition and behavior habits without [economic losses](#), with more than half of studied actions leading to a reduction in Body Mass Index or improved [dietary intake](#).

Schools that implemented simple visual cues such as using labels with positive emojis next to healthy food options led to a change in behavior in 76 percent of people. Providing healthy side dish options or changing portion sizes and having access to healthy options also led to behavior changes in 71 percent and 80 percent of cases, respectively.

Considering the high processed food intake in Europe, reformulating food products to improve children's nutrition is also crucial, according to the report. The evidence suggest consumers accepted reformulation, with a reported 0.57g daily reduction intake of salt and an overall 38 percent to 85 percent reduced intake of trans fats.

Societal impact on obesity

The findings from the report show that in developed countries, socially disadvantaged children—those from families with low incomes, ethnic minorities, low education backgrounds or those who have limited knowledge and means to take care of their

own health, are at greater risk of becoming overweight or obese.

The STOP report focuses on the idea that obesity has multiple, diverse characteristics, meaning that one-size-fits-all policy approaches are unlikely to succeed.

Professor Sassi said: "The behaviors of children from low socio-economic backgrounds are the ones we understand the least, and the drivers of those behaviors are what we need to change if we want to make a significant difference in childhood [obesity](#) ."

More information: The findings of the STOP report are published in a series of papers in *Obesity Reviews*:

onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/1467789x/2021/22/2

Provided by Imperial College London

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