

BBC News Online
London, UK
14 December, 2007

Call for rethink in obesity fight

Obesity cannot be tackled by just encouraging healthier eating and more exercise, health experts say.

The experts, led by a London-based academic, say governments should adopt more sophisticated approaches.

Work conditions, food subsidies, town planning and advert restrictions are all key, the experts wrote in the British Medical Journal.

The UK's Association of Directors of Public Health said change was happening but further improvements were needed.

Latest statistics show that a quarter of adults are obese in the UK, but the percentage is predicted to rise to over 50% if current trends continue.

The findings mirror the conclusions of the recent government-backed Foresight report in the UK, which said societal issues were also to blame for rising obesity levels.

These experts, led by a University College London academic, agreed, saying tackling obesity was far more complex than just encouraging healthy eating and more exercise.

They said large supermarket chains had displaced small, family-run stores and encouraged bulk purchases, convenience foods and super-sized portions.

They also criticised the impact of food advertising which they said encouraged children in particular to desire foods "high in saturated fats, sugars and salt".

And they said urban planning and design could play a key role in encouraging people to walk around towns rather than rely on cars.

These factors were particularly important for people from deprived areas as they were often more constrained by such barriers, they said.

'Dynamic'

The authors pointed to the example set by Norway, which has used a combination of food subsidies, price manipulation and clear nutrition labelling to steer people away from unhealthy food.

UCL expert Sharon Friel said a "dynamic" response was needed that included joined-up action at global, national and local levels.

"Missing in most obesity prevention strategies is the recognition that obesity - and its unequal distribution - is the consequence of a complex system that is shaped by how society organises its affairs."

Dr Tim Crayford, president of the Association of Directors of Public Health, said it was well-known that obesity was caused by multi-factoral problems.

"There has been a lack of co-ordination over this and the response has therefore been slow."

And he added: "There are signs that is now changing, but we are battling against the desire in western societies for more affluence which means more cars and richer food."

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7142176.stm>