



The Australian Prevention
Partnership Centre
Systems and solutions for better health

Roadmap to tackle obesity prevention

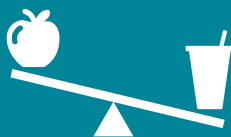
The project: Benchmarking obesity prevention policies in Australia

Project lead: Dr Gary Sacks, Deakin University

Project start: September 2015 **Project end:** March 2017

Key messages

- Unhealthy diets are causing a public health crisis. They are one of the leading contributors to poor health and chronic disease in Australia.
- In an Australian first, this project conducted a systematic analysis of Australia's policies for addressing unhealthy diets and obesity. It looked at how national, state and territory policies measure up against international best practice and identified recommendations for each jurisdiction.
- The project found Australia is leading the world in some policies to improve population nutrition, including key aspects of food labelling (such as regulations regarding health claims, and the development of the Health Star Rating system); keeping nutritious food GST-free; and the regular monitoring of population body weight.
- However, Australia is falling behind international best practice in other critical areas.
- States and territories vary in their level of implementation of internationally recommended policies.
- There is a wide range of actions that each government in Australia could take to address unhealthy diets and obesity.
- This study identified critical action areas for Australian governments to tackle the rise of obesity through unhealthy diets, including:
 - Developing a national strategy and implementation plan to improve population nutrition
 - Imposing taxes to increase the price of unhealthy foods (especially sugary drinks)
 - Introducing regulations to reduce exposure of children to marketing of unhealthy food.



Australia is leading the world in **some policies to improve nutrition** but lagging in others



We worked with **100 experts to compare obesity policies** with international best practice



We found Australia needs a national **strategy to improve nutrition**

Why is this issue important?

Unhealthy diets and obesity are leading causes of poor health in Australia.¹ Almost two out of three (63%) Australian adults and one in four (25%) Australian children are overweight or obese.² The costs associated with overweight and obesity have been estimated at more than \$56 billion each year.³

Less than 7% of Australians consume diets that are consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines. At least 35% of the energy intake of adults and up to 41% of the energy intake of children comes from unhealthy ('junk') food and drinks.⁴ Unhealthy diets include too much salt (leading to strokes), too much fat (leading to obesity and heart disease), too much sugar (leading to obesity and diabetes) and insufficient fruit and vegetables (leading to a number of chronic diseases).

There is good international evidence on what we should do – but implementing recommended policies to improve population nutrition has been slow in Australia and globally. Before this project, there was no way to monitor or benchmark Australian jurisdictions' performance against internationally agreed targets.

What did we do?

This project aimed to benchmark jurisdictions (federal government and states/territories) against international best practice, and provide recommendations on what they need to do to improve performance.

The project developed the Food Policy Index: 42 key government policy actions related to food environments and infrastructure that have been shown to have an important impact on population diets. This was based on the Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI), developed by the International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS, www.informas.org).

The team worked closely with government officials in each jurisdiction to document current policy actions in these 42 areas up to 30 June 2016. More than 100 non-government experts (including academics, nutritionists, and senior representatives from health NGOs and community groups) from 53 organisations assessed the extent to which each level of government had implemented each of these policy areas.

It then produced a scorecard and priority recommendations for each government.



The study has drawn on expertise from more than 100 nutritionists, health organisations, academics and community groups. It builds a comprehensive picture of where we can act to make the most difference. This collaborative effort makes it all the more powerful."

Dr Gary Sacks
Project lead

What did we find?

The project found that Australia is leading the world in the implementation of some policies to address unhealthy diets, including:

- ✓ Aspects of food labelling (such as regulations regarding health claims, and the Health Star Rating system)
- ✓ Food prices (no GST on basic foods)
- ✓ Regular monitoring of population body weight.

However, Australia is significantly lagging behind other countries in some critical areas, including:

- ✗ Development of an overall national strategy and implementation plan for improving population nutrition
- ✗ Efforts to restrict marketing of unhealthy food to children
- ✗ Taxes to increase the price of unhealthy foods (especially sugary drinks).

At a state/territory level, policies among global best practice benchmarks are:

- Menu labelling regulations (ACT/NSW/QLD/SA)
- Support and training systems to help schools and organisations to provide healthy foods (VIC)
- Independent statutory health promotion agencies (VIC/WA)
- Public education campaigns regarding nutrition and obesity (WA)
- Mechanisms to incorporate population health considerations into all policy development processes (SA).

However, there is inconsistency between the states and territories in their level of implementation of internationally recommended policies. The project's key recommendations for states and territories are:

- Improve the healthiness of foods and reduce the promotion of unhealthy foods in settings controlled or managed by governments
- Incorporate population nutrition considerations and healthy food environments as part of planning provisions
- Implement policies to increase awareness and compliance with existing healthy food provision policies in schools
- Improve monitoring of food environments (particularly food provision and promotion).

What did we produce?

- Documents outlining policy details for each state and territory and the federal government, across all the indicators of the Food Policy Index
- Workshops in each state and territory bringing together experts in nutrition and obesity prevention
- Scorecard and priority recommendations for each government in Australia – posted on a new website: www.foodpolicyindex.org.au
- Widespread national media coverage in February 2017 on all major television networks, high-profile print media and radio. The launch drew responses from the Federal Health Minister, the Federal Opposition and the Australian Food and Grocery Council.

Why does it matter?

Obesity and diet-related chronic diseases are now a public health crisis. Educating people to eat more healthily is not working and comprehensive action is needed by governments to improve population nutrition.

This landmark project aimed to increase the accountability of Australian governments for their role in preventing obesity. It has provided a roadmap for jurisdictions to meet international best practice benchmarks in the area.

The project builds the case for strategic commitment to invest in improving population nutrition and preventive health, and for a coordinated national action, underpinned by a national strategy, to ensure that successful policy initiatives are broadly applied.

Next steps

- There is an ongoing program of knowledge exchange with government officials across the country and ongoing advocacy from key partner organisations.
- A follow-up study in 2–3 years will be required to assess progress.

References

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