



SACN Draft Carbohydrates and Health Report

Comments

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About Heart of Mersey

Heart of Mersey is England's largest regional heart health charity working across Cheshire & Merseyside (and beyond) to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) and related conditions such as cancer, diabetes and stroke.

Heart of Mersey is currently managing a campaign called Food Active on behalf of the North West Directors of Public Health which is advocating for population-level measures to reduce the levels of overweight and obesity across North West England.

General comments

Heart of Mersey welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the SACN Draft Carbohydrates and Health Report. An overarching priority for Food Active is to tackle obesity across the North West and nationally. The proportion of the population affected by obesity continues to rise and of particular concern, is the increasing rate of overweight and obesity amongst infants and children. This is particularly prevalent in lower socio-economic groups. Within the North West of England, nearly 10% of the Reception year children measured in 2011/12 were obese. By Year 6, the rate of obesity doubled to 19.8% (figures from the National Child Measurement Programme¹).



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There has been extensive work into relevant areas of physiological research since previous reports regarding carbohydrate metabolism and health were published between 1989 and 1994, therefore Food Active welcomes the update to government guidelines on carbohydrates.

Introduction

The SACN report provides a thorough, systematic review of the current knowledge in terms of the biological effect of carbohydrates on health. The results show that a diet high in sugar is harmful for health, with many of the health consequences, including obesity, type 2 diabetes and dental decay, disproportionately affecting the more socially deprived. The report provides objective and independent evidence based on a large group of studies, which is of value for decision makers tasked with reducing sugar consumption and its associated health costs.

Current intake

Dietary survey data show that current sugar intake is much higher in adults than current recommendations, and is even higher in children². A major factor is that sugar is difficult to avoid as it is hidden in many foods, both savoury and sweet. It is added to low fat foods to improve the taste, and can be used as a bulking agent. Whilst there is no robust evidence to suggest sugar is addictive, it is acknowledged that many people find it difficult to avoid. Consumption is exacerbated by low prices, wide availability and clever and effective marketing and advertising by food manufacturers.

Free sugars

The adoption of the term 'free sugars' is welcomed. In addition to being consistent with the WHO guideline, it reduces confusion in current terminologies which include non-milk intrinsic sugars or added sugars. However, there remains a labelling issue as sugar in foods is described as total sugar, and currently there is no way of identifying free sugars. This is confusing with products such as fruit yoghurts, where there is a significant contribution of lactose, which while being in the free form, is not classified as a free sugar. Food Active would recommend that nutritional labelling is improved to make it easier for the public to make informed decisions.

Recommended intake

Food Active welcome the bold and ambitious recommendations which include guidance to reduce free sugar intake to 5% of total calories per day, in line with WHO recommendation on sugars. If an average woman were to consume only 5% of her daily energy (based on 2,000 calories) from free sugars, then this would equate to 5-6 teaspoons of table sugar which is far less than the amount of sugar contained in a standard 300ml serving of sugar-sweetened beverage.

Sugar-sweetened beverages

Research has shown that the most effective way of reducing sugar is by eliminating sugar-sweetened beverages. Sugar-sweetened beverages have no nutritional value, and are essentially liquid calories. Data shows that these beverages provide a third of the total sugar in an average teenager's diet. Results from the last National Diet and Nutrition Survey indicated that sugar-sweetened beverages are the biggest contributor of excess free sugars in the diets for the majority of the population, with the exception of the very young and the very old.

The report highlights, that the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages has an effect on weight gain, overweight/obesity, dental caries, and increases the risk of type 2 diabetes. Food Active fully



supports the recommendation that the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages should be minimised in both children and adults.

Reformulation and other proposed measures

The public are aware that sugar-sweetened beverages contain high amounts of sugar, and the recommended guidelines will help to increase that awareness, however more needs to be done.

Public Health England, with support of a number of organisations including many in the food and drink industry, suggest reformulation as an option to reduce sugar consumption. Whilst reformulation has been successful when it comes to salt reduction, sugar poses certain issues including the texture and bulking properties it provides. Additionally, artificially sweetened drinks have been available for over 20 years and yet the sugar sweetened versions still far outsell the low/zero sugar options, with sales of artificially sweetened versions actually falling in recent years.

A duty on sugar-sweetened beverages

Food Active therefore believes it is necessary for a comprehensive package of policy measures to challenge the current high consumption of sugar. Our research has shown that a 20p per litre duty on sugar-sweetened beverages would lead to a reduction in the number of cases of obesity across the North West of England by over 19,500. Our research also indicates that this would lead to a concomitant reduction in the number of cases of type 2 diabetes, stroke, coronary heart disease and cancer³.

At the heart of our favoured approach sits the principle that whilst approaches to reduce sugar that utilise public information campaigns, voluntary guidelines and warning labels on products are of value, it is only approaches that have a direct impact upon availability and supply, such as a duty on sugary drinks that will have a truly transformative impact upon public health outcomes.

It is also our recommendation, in line with those suggested by Public Health England, that fiscal measures to combat sugar intake should take the form of a hypothecated tax which would provide revenue to a health fund.

Furthermore, Food Active would favour legislation that places restrictions upon the advertisement of high sugar food and drink to children and adults (e.g. close down loopholes that allow adverts for unhealthy food and drinks on TV before 9pm). Food Active would also favour restrictions on junk food and drink sponsorship of sport and leisure activities, for example, the Coca Cola ParkLives initiative.

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