A WEIGHTY ISSUE

A STUDY OF UK ADULTS’ CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOURS, KNOWLEDGE OF CALORIE AND ADDED SUGAR GUIDELINES AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overweight and obesity is the single biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking and is estimated to cause 18,100 cancer cases each year in the UK\(^1\). Thirteen types of cancer\(^2\) including, breast (after menopause), bowel and womb\(^1\) are linked to this risk factor. In addition to cancer, evidence shows obesity to be a risk factor for diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke and other health conditions\(^3\). In 2012 the total economic cost of obesity to the UK was estimated at £47 billion\(^4\).

To date there is only limited research into the consumption of ready meals, fast food and takeaways and confectionary amongst the UK adult population. By gaining a better understanding of the behaviours associated with regularly consumed food categories, we can better inform population level interventions. To date, no UK data has yet linked physical activity and weight to consumption behaviours and knowledge of calorie and added sugar guidelines. The data used explores adult consumption behaviour and how this links to calorie and sugar consumption guideline knowledge, as well as physical activity for the first time on a UK-wide scale.

METHODS

This study was carried out by the Policy Research Centre for Cancer Prevention (PRCP) at Cancer Research UK. It follows a recent publication which found that only 1 in 4 people are aware of the link between

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obesity and cancer. The aim of this study was to measure food and soft drink consumption behaviours, physical activity levels, and calorie and sugar guideline knowledge in the UK adult population; and to explore the associations between these. A sample of 3,293 members of the general population completed the online survey.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Seventy-nine million ready meals are consumed by adults in the UK each week.
- Twenty-two million fast food and takeaways were consumed by adults in the UK each week.
- Almost a third (31%) of people consumed confectionery every day.
- Males consumed significantly more ready meals, soft drinks and fast food and takeaways than females.
- The 18-24 age group consumed more soft drinks, confectionery, ready meals and fast food and takeaways than older age groups.
- Despite consuming the highest levels of unhealthy food, the 18-24 age group had a better knowledge of calorie guidelines than those aged 45 or older.
- Significantly more people in Scotland consumed confectionery at least once a day than in England (39% vs. 30%).
- Almost a half (46%) of obese people were sufficiently active.

This report has shown that differences exist in the reported consumption behaviours, physical activity levels and diet guideline knowledge between different sexes and age groups. Having a better understanding of calorie guidelines or being more likely to meet minimum exercise requirements did not necessarily lead to better consumption behaviours or having a lower BMI.

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POLICY AND PUBLIC HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for a wide-ranging, comprehensive obesity strategy – as outlined in a Cancer Research UK and UK Health Forum report released in 2016\(^6\) – which builds on the measures announced in the Childhood Obesity Plan\(^7\) to reduce levels of obesity in the UK.

The results in the report highlight the importance of reformulation of food high in fat, sugar and salt as part of a comprehensive obesity strategy. Such programmes should look at calorie reduction in commonly consumed food amongst adults, such as ready meals, and foods consumed outside of the home.

It is important to consider the variations in consumption, knowledge and physical activity levels between males and females and other groups outlined in this report to prevent such disparities from widening further. This demonstrates the need for tailored and targeted interventions, to compliment population level measures.

AUTHORS

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CANCER RESEARCH UK

Every year around 300,000 people are diagnosed with cancer in the UK and more than 150,000 people die from cancer. Cancer Research UK is the world’s leading cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. The charity’s pioneering work has been at the heart of the progress that has already seen survival rates in the UK double in the last forty years. As the largest fundraising charity in the UK, we support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2015/16, we spent £404 million on research. We receive no funding from the Government for our research, and of every £1 donated, 80p was available for investment in our core purpose. This research was funded by the Policy Research Centre for Cancer Prevention, Cancer Research UK.

Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and the Isle of Man (1103).

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