

**PUBLIC
KNOWLEDGE
OF THE LINK
BETWEEN
OBESITY AND
CANCER**

SEPTEMBER 2016



**CANCER
RESEARCH
UK**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

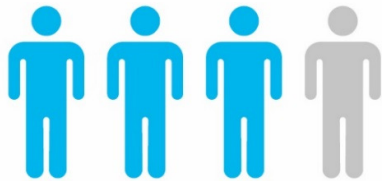
Being overweight and obese is the single biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking and is estimated to cause 18,100 cancer cases each year in the UK.¹ If current trends of overweight and obesity continued, it will lead to a further 670,000 cancer cases over the next 20 years.²

There is considerable evidence to show that being overweight or obese is linked to 10 types of cancers. This includes two of the most common, breast and bowel, and two of the hardest to treat, pancreatic and oesophageal. However little is known about public awareness of this association.

THREE IN FOUR
PEOPLE ARE
UNAWARE OF THE
LINK BETWEEN
OBESITY AND
CANCER

AWARENESS OF CANCER LINKED TO OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY

Around **3 in 4 people** did not think cancer could result from being overweight or obese.*



*When asked "Which, if any, health conditions do you think can result from being obese/overweight?"

METHODS

This study, carried out by the Policy Research Centre for Cancer Prevention (PRCP), Cancer Research UK. The aim was to explore public awareness of obesity and health risks, particularly of cancer, and which factors influence this. A sample of 3,293 members of the general population completed the online survey.

KEY FINDINGS

- Three in four (75%) people were unaware of the link between obesity and cancer when asked an unprompted question.
- Those from the highest social grade³ were approximately 50% more likely to mention cancer as being linked to obesity than those from the lowest social grade.

¹ Parkin DM, Boyd L. 8. Cancers attributable to overweight and obesity in the UK in 2010. Br J Cancer. 2011;105 Suppl 2:S34-7.

² Cancer Research UK, UK Health Forum. Tipping the scales: Why preventing obesity makes economic sense. 2016.

³ Social grades are based on the National Readership Survey (NRS) system and use income and profession to group respondents into four grades (from highest to lowest): AB, C1, C2, DE.

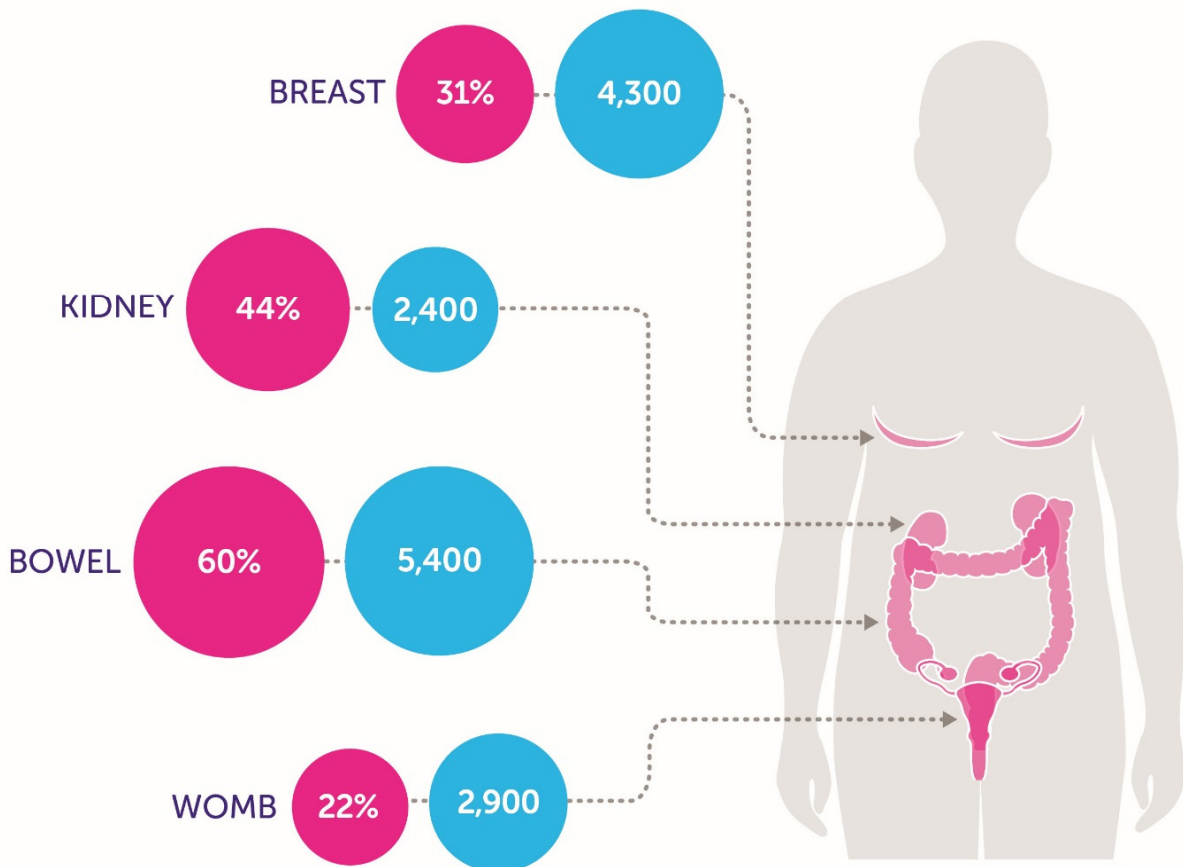
- Men were less likely to list cancer as a health risk than women.
- When asked a prompted question only 58% of the public selected cancer as a condition linked to overweight or obese, whereas 94% selected diabetes.
- The public were most aware of cancers relating to organs that are used as part of the digestive system, such as the bowel, liver and pancreas.
- There were poor levels of awareness for other cancer types as being linked to obesity, such as advanced prostate and ovarian cancer.

This study has shown that cancer is not at the forefront of people’s minds when thinking about health conditions linked to obesity. Those from the lowest social grade have the lowest levels of cancer awareness, demonstrating the need to increase access to health information across the UK.

AWARENESS OF FOUR CANCER TYPES LINKED TO OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY

% who correctly thought being overweight or obese increased the risk of the following cancers

Number of cases caused by being overweight or obese in the UK each year



POLICY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Tackling obesity is an integral part of cancer prevention strategies. While obesity is a complex health condition influenced by a range of factors⁴, there remains much that Government can do.

In August 2016 the Government published *Childhood obesity: A plan for action*.⁵ While the plan included a levy on the production of sugar-sweetened beverages, it did not address all the factors that contribute to the obesogenic environment. In particular, the exclusion of measures to reduce children's exposure to junk food marketing means that the plan is at best "partial".

An effective childhood obesity strategy should include:

- Restrictions to the marketing of unhealthy foods;
- Fiscal measures;
- Reformulation of processed foods.

Government has a responsibility to raise awareness of the links between overweight and obesity and health conditions, such as cancer among both the public and healthcare workers.

The concerning low levels of cancer awareness and particularly the gap in levels of knowledge between the highest and lowest social grade is of direct relevance to healthcare professionals, particularly those involved in designing interventions targeted at addressing the issues highlighted in this report.

This also demonstrates the need for:

- Tailored and targeted interventions;
- Population-level interventions that will help support people to make positive changes.⁶

AUTHORS

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CANCER RESEARCH UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. We support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2014/15, we spent £434 million on research institutes, hospitals and universities across the UK – including a £41 million contribution we made to the Francis Crick Institute. We receive no funding from the Government for our research. This project has been commissioned by the Cancer Research UK Policy Research Centre for Cancer Prevention. For more information on this study please contact PRCP-team@cancer.org.uk

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



⁴ Wright SM, Aronne LJ. Causes of obesity. *Abdominal Imaging*. 2012;37(5):730-2.

⁵ HM Government. *Childhood Obesity: A Plan for Action*. 2016.

⁶ Independent Cancer Taskforce. *Achieving world-class cancer outcomes: A strategy for England 2015 - 2020*. 2015.

