About our current obesity campaign - creating the right environment for policy change

Our mission is to beat cancer and one of the ways this can be done is to prevent as many cases of cancer as possible. Reducing levels of obesity is a priority for us as excess weight is the biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking in the UK.

There’s no silver bullet for making this happen, and many things need to change in the food environment so healthy habits are easier to maintain.

No-one should feel to blame for their cancer. Obesity is a complex issue that can have many contributing factors; primarily the environment we live in but also factors including genetics and certain health conditions and medications. And weight can be a sensitive and highly emotional issue. We will continue to seek advice, and listen and learn from others, especially those with lived experience, as we keep pushing for Government-led change.

Throughout our work on obesity, we have set ourselves four core aims about the communications we put out:

1. To raise awareness of the link between overweight and obesity and cancer
2. To raise awareness of the influence of society and our environments on weight
3. To gain support for our policy calls from both the public and policy makers, and show the effectiveness of these measures
4. To communicate in a respectful and non-stigmatising way to engage with people who are overweight or obese, through providing information and supporting people to make healthy changes.

Why we want to raise awareness

Research has proven that raising awareness of an issue, getting it talked about and making it part of popular opinion helps to create an environment where policy makers need to take action.

We want to see improved restrictions on junk food advertising and promotions that will support healthier eating habits.

In June 2018, three months after our first nationwide obesity health awareness campaign, the UK Government published Chapter 2 of its Childhood Obesity Plan. The plan included a bold ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030. We particularly welcomed the Government announcing its intention to consult on introducing a 9pm watershed for junk food ads on TV, with similar measures online and on-demand. With that consultation having recently closed and responses being reviewed, as well as a new Prime Minister about to take office, this is an important moment to remind policy makers why changes are required.

Obesity rates, amongst other health risk factors, are highest among those from the most deprived groups, which means that they also disproportionately bear the associated health burden. Industry pricing, promotions and marketing tactics mean that unhealthy food is often cheaper, more visible and more familiar than healthy options, making it harder for families on low incomes to make healthy choices. The evidence shows that population-level measures which modify the environment are more likely to benefit these groups than interventions which rely on information and voluntary behaviour change.

In particular, we want to protect future generations. We want to give children a better chance to eat healthily, stay a healthy weight and avoid cancer in later life.
To reduce obesity rates, we’ve previously campaigned for the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (‘sugar tax’), which was introduced in April 2018. The Levy resulted in over 50% of manufacturers reducing the sugar content of drinks between when it was announced in March 2016 and when it came into force – the equivalent of a total reduction of over 90 million kg of sugar in just two years. CRUK’s Scale Down Cancer campaign, running in Scotland since late-2016, significantly influenced the development of the Scottish Government’s Healthy Weight Delivery Plan, which set out actions to deliver First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s commitment to halve childhood obesity by 2030.

Every one of our posters carries the campaign url cru.uk/endpointfoodadstokids – spelling out what we want to achieve, as well as symbolising our desire to take people on that journey from information to action.

**Communicating the link between obesity and cancer**

A wealth of evidence from decades of research involving millions of people which has led us to be able to confidently say that there is a causal link between excess weight and cancer. Both the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) both state this as a fact.

22,800 cases of cancer in the UK every year are linked to overweight or obesity. Obesity is linked to 13 different types of cancer, including two of the most common – breast and bowel.

However, this doesn’t mean that everyone that is overweight will get cancer. Factors that cause cancer - whether that’s tobacco, being overweight or obese, alcohol, or the sun - increase an individual person’s risk of cancer, but do not mean that person will definitely develop cancer. Lots of things make up an individual’s personal risk of cancer and in most cases, we can’t know what has caused an individual person’s cancer. But at a population level, being exposed to a risk factor causes more people to develop cancer.

It’s similar to how speeding is a cause of car accidents – not everyone that speeds will have an accident, but the more people that speed the more accidents will happen.

**Communicating in a respectful and non-stigmatising way**

Weight stigma is something we take very seriously. We have adopted many of the principles promoted by the World Obesity Federation and have signed up to the Obesity Health Alliance’s weight stigma position statement.

We are comparatively early in our journey in terms of engagement with people living with obesity and the related issues. We would very much like to continue the conversations about mental health and physical health and the significant related health inequalities.

All of our advertising campaigns are developed with the involvement of the general public which includes people with obesity, and people who have experience of cancer. We also hold discussions with health professionals, nutritionists, obesity policy experts and health campaigners, to get their perspectives – and to challenge us to keep on honing our language and messaging. We will continue to seek advice and learn from others, especially those with lived experience.

**Communicating in a way that will help change public discourse**

After we had conducted our first nationwide obesity health awareness campaign last year, a survey found that 84% of the UK public agreed that this is an important message (conducted with a nationally representative sample of over 2,000 people). In response to our latest campaign, a
Twitter poll initiated by consumer champion Martin Lewis and completed by over 15,000 people, showed an almost 4:1 ratio in support from those who described themselves as overweight, and in total over 80% of respondents were in support of our adverts.

But we know it’s not as simple as that and there are many more outside influences at play, particularly in the case of more easily influenced young people. Currently one in three children in England leave primary school overweight or obese, putting them at greater risk of poor health in later life - a child who is obese is around five times more likely to be obese as an adult.

**Communicating in a way that seeks to address health inequalities**

Local government also plays a role, alongside the health service, in delivering public health. As already seen with tobacco control and stop smoking services, we are concerned that the impact of cuts to weight management services and to local obesity prevention measures could be felt most in the more deprived parts of the country, exacerbating existing health inequalities. Local and regional authorities are also well-placed to champion a ‘health in all policies’ approach that address the wider determinants of health – including environmental, social, economic and commercial determinants. Through our advocacy work, we continue to push for Government to ensure that local authorities have the resources to be able to deliver on this.

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