

World Heart Federation statement on childhood obesity

In light of the recent announcement in the UK of plans to introduce a sugar levy, which follows the maintaining of tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in Mexico, and recognizing the scale of childhood obesity, the World Heart Federation believes that more emphasis should be placed on children's nutrition. Action must be taken to address the significant barriers of private sector resistance, industry influence, socio-cultural feeding norms, government apathy and lack of capacity.

"The World Heart Federation supports the increased taxes on the foods and beverages that can lead to obesity, which increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes and cancer. We welcome the announcement in the UK of a sugar tax, particularly in light of the objective to use the £520 million levy for sport in schools, and we were pleased to actively support the maintaining of taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages in Mexico.

"The World Heart Federation and our Past President, Professor Srinath Reddy, have also been instrumental in producing the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) report. The report highlights that the greatest risk to progress on childhood obesity is that governments and other actors will fail to take ownership, leadership and the necessary actions. When countries like the UK and Mexico do take such actions, it is to be applauded and we hope that other nations will follow suit."

Johanna Ralston, CEO, World Heart Federation

Everyone has a responsibility to prevent and control obesity in children, using the range of knowledge, resources, policies and tools available to them.

For policy-makers and healthcare workers, this includes: the promotion and support of exclusive breast feeding for the first six months; implementing WHO's set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children; and creating health and nutrition promoting environments.

The World Heart Federation also supports increased taxes on the specific foods and beverages that can increase obesity. This was demonstrated in our recent support for legislators in Mexico and we also support the announcement in the UK on 16 March regarding a sugar tax which aims to raise £520 million to be spent on doubling the amount of money spent on sport in schools.

These measures are particularly important for reducing childhood obesity. Managing food taxes and subsidies to promote healthy diets is a recommended policy option in the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020. WHF has two programmes directly dealing with the issues of childhood obesity; Eat For Goals, which consists of heart-healthy recipes from famous football players and Children in the City which aims at increasing physical activity in 7-12 year olds from low income areas.

Childhood obesity is generally preventable through a combination of healthy diet and physical activity, but in some cases special consideration is required. Children across the world live with NCDs that can prevent physical activity and lead to childhood obesity, including: asthma, sickle-cell and rheumatic heart disease. Specific policy options need to be implemented to support children at high risk of obesity, even as governments commit to designing, implementing and supporting programmes to encourage physical activity in children and foster healthy eating habits. The health sector should also retain its leading stance in addressing the role of urbanization in the development of obesity, as over half the world's population now live in urban areas.

As part of our commitment to the goal of reducing premature mortality from CVD by 25% by 2025, which is aligned to the World Health Organization target on NCDs, the World Heart Federation continues to work with governments, the WHO and other stakeholders to halt global obesity rates in children, adolescents and adults.

Context

Worldwide, in 2013, one in ten school-aged children and 42 million children under 5 were estimated to be overweight. This figure is expected to increase to 70 million by 2025. Childhood obesity is not just a disease of rich countries: close to 35 million of these young children are living in low- and middle- income countries. While childhood obesity is already entrenched in some areas, it is on the rise in others. For example, in the USA, the number of overweight children has doubled and the number of overweight adolescents has tripled since 1980.

Childhood obesity leads to adult obesity, which increases the risk of developing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes and cancer. Reducing childhood obesity is a key approach to the primary prevention of NCDs, and could save millions of lives each year.

Environmental factors associated with economic growth, urbanization and globalization, as well as **behavioural factors** such as changing nutrition choices and increasing physical inactivity, are



driving the obesity epidemic among children. Children are now consuming more ‘unhealthy’ (energy-dense, nutrient-poor) foods and drinks, while at the same time there has been a decrease in their physical activity. (The World Health Organization recommends that 5-17 year olds should undertake at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily – currently only 19% of 11-17 year olds actually achieve this worldwide.) Consequently, schools have a very important role in preventing obesity by providing more nutritious food, educating children about the value of a healthy diet, enabling and encouraging physical activity.

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About the World Heart Federation

The World Heart Federation is the only global advocacy and leadership organization bringing together the cardiovascular disease (CVD) community to help people everywhere lead heart-healthy lives. We strive for a world where there are at least 25% fewer premature deaths from CVD by 2025.

That’s why we and our 200+ members work courageously to end needless deaths from exposure to tobacco and other risk factors, lack of access to treatment, and neglected conditions like rheumatic heart disease which kills hundreds of thousands of children each year. Across 100 countries, with its members, the World Heart Federation works to build global commitment to addressing cardiovascular health at the policy level, generates and exchanges ideas, shares best practice, advances scientific knowledge and promotes knowledge transfer to tackle CVD– the world’s number one killer. World Heart Federation is at the heart of driving the CVD agenda and advocating for better heart health – enabling people to live longer, better and more heart healthy lives whoever and wherever they are.

For more information, please visit: www.worldheart.org; www.facebook.com/worldheartfederation and twitter.com/worldheartfed