

The CO-CREATE Youth Declaration: Time to Act and Ensure Good Health for All

We need our politicians and stakeholders to act and bring the childhood and adolescent obesity epidemic to an end!

Did you know that the percentage of children and adolescents in the world who lives with overweight and obesity has doubled since the 1970's?ⁱ The World Health Organization (WHO) actually lists childhood obesity as one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century.ⁱⁱ Obesity often comes with severe consequences. Firstly, living with obesity as a child, makes one more likely to continue living with obesity in adulthood.ⁱⁱⁱ Secondly, overweight and obesity is associated with numerous health challenges and diseases, including diabetes, some types of cancer and cardiovascular diseases.^{iv}

The increased number of people living with obesity is a direct consequence of changes in our society's food systems. Foods high in refined carbohydrates, sugars, saturated fats and meat as well as processed, energy-dense foods have become more available and cheaper, making it more accessible, especially to the poorer part of the population.

But obesity is preventable! Individual based interventions have long been the main focus of overweight prevention. Yet, data shows that while the awareness of factors that can lead to obesity has increased, the number of people living with obesity has not decreased.^v It is time to stop framing obesity as a question regarding the individual, but rather a challenge that should be addressed at the system level. In other words: we need a systematic change, where the healthiest choices become the preferred ones!

The time to act is now! COVID-19 has highlighted the importance and urgent need of including obesity in countries' national health guidelines. In responding to the pandemic, our state leaders now have the chance to build back better. This is in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which as one of its targets aims to reduce one third of premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention by 2030.^{vi}

By portraying overweight and obesity as something the individual is responsible for, one does not only promote interventions with limited success but could also inflict weight stigma. Weight stigma is considered to have psychological consequences, such as increased depression and decreased self-esteem. Such mental health problems might also negatively affect the health of individuals because they can make it harder to eat healthy and stay active.

Rather, a structural approach that addresses the root causes of overweight and obesity is needed.^{vii} That is why we are urging governments to develop whole-of-society, sustained and coherent nutrition- and physical activity-related policies. That is also why this document does not address individuals but policy makers, who are the ones in position to change the structures that are affecting the lives of individuals.



We, as young people, are the only ones who know what it is like to be young today. To reach our goal of ending obesity among adolescents, policy makers and stakeholders need to work *with* us, so that we - together - can develop policy interventions to prevent obesity. Preventing obesity is a complex process that requires action on all policy fields and the involvement of several actors. We have identified four demands we see as crucial starting points towards ending obesity among adolescents.

1) Stop all marketing of unhealthy foods to children under the age of 18 years

We are demanding that all states in Europe regulate and stop all marketing of unhealthy food products to children under the age of 18.

Studies have found that children are extensively exposed to marketing of unhealthy products and that this has an influence on their food preferences and consumption patterns.^{viii} In light of this evidence, WHO recommends states to implement the necessary measures to reduce marketing and exposure to marketing of unhealthy products.

We are therefore demanding that all states in Europe stop all marketing to children under the age of 18 of energy-dense, nutrient poor foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt and brands associated with such products. The categorisation of such foods should be based on nutrition guidelines established by WHO. The regulation should apply to all commercials which are broadcasted before and after TV-shows targeting children and mass communicated messages where children are considered to be especially vulnerable due to overall communication and presentation cues (such as use of language and design, representation of children or characters that are familiar to children, inclusion of free gifts, toys or collectible items with appeal to children) and placement (in areas where children stay or are likely to spend time) including, and especially considering, digital marketing.

2) Secure all children high-quality, practical based food and nutrition education in school and a healthy school cafeteria

We are demanding that all European states ensure all children access to high-quality, practical based food and nutritional education in school.

To eat healthy, one basic requirement is that one knows what food is healthy and what food is not, and that one knows how one can prepare healthy food. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to the United Nations promotes educational strategies and learning activities as important steps towards improved diets, especially where it is complemented with healthy food environments.^{ix} According to FAO, it is important that such education supports creative learning and goes beyond being classroom-based, only giving generic nutrition information, but rather promotes practical learning, skill development, opportunities to deal with food and practice in real life settings (as markets, cafeterias and homes). The education should be evidence-based, promote children and youth's health and wellbeing, while empowering them to become active agents of change in their local food systems.



The nutritional education must be supported by healthy school cafeterias. There is no point in teaching students to eat healthy if their school cafeteria does not serve healthy food. Schools should set a healthy example for their students by only selling and serving food in accordance with WHO nutritional recommendations and not being allowed to serve products violating these guidelines.

We therefore demand that all European states ensure that all children are given high-quality, practical based food and nutrition education in school, that enables children to eat healthy and empowers them. Nutritional education must be supported by a healthy food environment at school and school cafeterias should therefore not be allowed to sell or serve unhealthy food.

3) Implement a sugar-sweetened beverage tax to make unhealthy foods more expensive

We are demanding that European states implement a sugar sweetened beverage tax. The tax should increase the prices on sugar sweetened beverages by 20%, in addition to taxing drinks by the amount of sugar per litre.

Today, sugar sweetened beverages are cheap and easily accessible. Sugar sweetened beverages have no nutritional value but they contribute to high sugar intakes.^x Systematic reviews show that an increased intake of free sugars, especially in the form of sugar sweetened beverages, leads to unhealthy weight gains.^{xi}

Studies have suggested that increased prices on sugar sweetened beverages can decrease the consumption of such products.^{xii} This can again push the beverage industry to produce products with less sugar. The UK, Mexico, France and Norway are among the states that have already taken bold measures to tax sugar sweetened beverages in an effort to build healthier societies - now it is time for more states to follow!

In line with the WHO,^{xiii} we demand that all European states implement a tax on sugar sweetened beverages that tax these products 20% of their transaction value in addition to a tax on the amount of sugar per litre bought. The tax should apply to all sweetened beverages, such as sodas, flavoured milk, energy drinks and flavoured waters.

4) Offer all children and adolescents free, organized physical activities at least once every week

We are demanding that all European states offer free and inclusive organised physical activity programmes for all children and adolescents at least once every week.

Research shows that more than 80% of adolescents in school age globally did not meet the recommendation of at least one hour of physical activity per day.^{xiv} This is considered to have severe health implications.

Participation in organised physical activity programmes for children in kindergarten and first grade has been found to be likely to lead to smaller increases in body weight.^{xv} At the same time, attending organised sporting activities can be expensive and require costly equipment.



We therefore demand that European states offer all children and adolescents free organised physical activities. The activities must be organised so that all children can participate, no matter their gender, ethnic background, health and functional ability and socioeconomic background. Where equipment is needed to attend the activity, lending schemes must be put in place so that everyone can participate.

The programmes can be organised as school activities or extracurricular activities. It should be fun for young people to participate. Schools should be organised so that young people can participate in these activities. This entails that students could be given less homework, if they participate in these activities.

The time to act is now!

Obesity has serious negative implications for public health. Yet, no country in the world is on track to meet WHO's target of 'no increase in obesity prevalence by 2025'. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us a chance to change our societies. We cannot simply go back to normal - but need to build back better!

To successfully prevent overweight and obesity among children and adolescents, a structural, whole-of-society approach, built in collaboration with young people, is needed. This entails complex measures on different fields of policy. We have here raised four action points we see as a crucial first step towards preventing obesity.

The time to act is now! Finding and implementing successful measures to prevent obesity among adolescents will require that youth, civil society, governments and the private sector come together. We are ready - and hope you will stand with us in the fight for a society where everyone can live healthy lives!



About this document

This document has been drafted and adopted by youth that have taken part in the CO-CREATE project. CO-CREATE is a research project, aiming to prevent overweight and obesity among adolescents by working with youth to provide knowledge and policy ideas to make the healthiest choices the preferred ones. In the project, youth and researchers have come together in Youth Alliances for Overweight Prevention in England, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Portugal. Here, we have developed policy ideas to combat the obesity epidemic. It is representatives from these alliances that have drafted this document, and youth from all of the alliances have been given the opportunity to make amendments and take part in the adoption of our demands.

About the CO-CREATE Project:

CO-CREATE, a five-year (2018-2023) research project funded through an EU Horizon 2020 grant, aims to reduce the prevalence of obesity among adolescents in Europe through policy actions to promote a healthier food and physical activity environment. CO-CREATE's vision is that before 2025, the rise in adolescent obesity will have come to a halt.

The project brings together a consortium of 14 international research and advocacy organisations, across 10 countries to generate new insights to childhood obesity, and its relation to implementation of policies.

For more information on CO-CREATE visit: www.co-create.eu

ⁱ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/end-childhood-obesity/en/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.imid.med.pl/images/do-pobrania/fimid-poradnik-web.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes.html>

^v <https://www.wcrf-uk.org/uk/latest/press-releases/awareness-not-enough-prevent-obesity>

^{vi} <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030-goal3.html>

^{vii} <https://www.worldobesityday.org>

^{viii} <https://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/marketing-food-to-children/en/>

^{ix} <http://www.fao.org/school-food/areas-work/based-food-nutrition-education/en/>

^x http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/wof-files/Implementing_sugar-sweetened_beverage_taxes_-_Consideration_for_European_policymakers.pdf

^{xi} https://www.who.int/elena/titles/commentary/ssbs_childhood_obesity/en/

^{xii} <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/260253/WHO-NMH-PND-16.5Rev.1-eng.pdf;jsessionid=A671F2B0037F0A9755FBBA89B907E83C?sequence=1>

^{xiii} <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/260253/WHO-NMH-PND-16.5Rev.1-eng.pdf;jsessionid=A671F2B0037F0A9755FBBA89B907E83C?sequence=1>

^{xiv} <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22869403/>

^{xv} file:///C:/Users/Margrete%20Katanasho/Downloads/poa120003_713_718.pdf

