

Briefing Note

Report: Obesity in Canada: A Whole-of-Society Approach for a Healthier Canada
Organization: Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology
Date of Release: March 2016

Background:

On March 1, 2016, the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology released "[Obesity in Canada: A Whole-of-Society Approach for a Health Canada](#)". This report examines the state of obesity in Canada and describes a whole-of-society approach to address this important issue.

The senate committee studied the issue between February 2014 and June 2015, hearing expert testimony from a range of Canadian and international stakeholders. The report highlights that a diet heavy on processed foods, combined with a lack of exercise is negatively health of many Canadians. A total of 21 recommendations were made in the report to help Canadians achieve and maintain healthy weights.

Report Summary:

The report warns that rising obesity rates among adults and children are taking an "enormous" toll on the health of Canadians with rising rates of diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses. The prevalence of obesity is influenced by the proliferation of fast and processed foods; obesogenic environments; confusing nutritional labelling; Canada's dated food guide; and the negative social determinants of health.

The obesity rates over the past thirty years have gone up considerably. Obesity in Canada by the numbers:

- Canada is among the countries with the highest obesity rates, ranking fifth in the world.
- 61% of Canadian adults are either overweight or obese.
- 33% Canadian children are other overweight or obese.
- 62% of the Canadian diet is made up of processed and ready-to-eat foods.
- \$4.6 to \$7.1 billion in direct health care costs and indirect costs associated with obesity.
- 15% of adults are getting the recommended 150 minutes of activity per week.
- Less than 9% of children and youth are sufficiently active, and the proportion of active kids decreased with age.

The problem is especially severe for Canada's Indigenous population, where 70% of adults and 62.5% of children under 11 are either overweight or obese. Type 2 diabetes is three to five times higher among First Nations people compared to the general population in Canada.

This report urges the federal government to take aggressive measures to return Canadians to healthy weights. The report's 21 recommendations provide the tools to do so; recommendations include:

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
The federal government, in partnership a wide range of stakeholders, create and implement a National Campaign to Combat Obesity.	National campaign is to include goals, timelines and annual progress reports.
Design and implement a prohibition on the advertising of foods and beverages to children.	The committee recommends that the federal government immediately conduct a thorough assessment of the prohibition on advertising food in Quebec, and base their prohibition on that assessment.
Assess the options for taxation levers with a view to implementing a new tax on sugar-sweetened and artificially-sweetened beverages.	Fiscal measures that were discussed frequently throughout the study were taxation of unhealthy foods and beverages and subsidies for healthy foods. Committee urges government to

	conduct a study, and report back by December 2016, on potential means of increasing the affordability of healthy foods.
Address the recommendations made by the Auditor General with respect to the Nutrition North program.	
The Minister of Health immediately undertakes a complete revision of Canada's food guide in order that it better reflect the current state of scientific evidence.	Canada's food guide has been ineffective, the report claims. The revised food guide must: be evidence-based; apply meal-based principles; describe the benefits of fresh, whole foods; and, make strong statements about restricting consumption of highly processed foods.
Amend the food regulations to mandate the use of the identified front-of-package approach on foods that are required to display a Nutrition Facts table.	Highly processed foods are being portrayed as healthier choices than they really are. The committee recommends a review of front-of-package labelling approaches that have been developed in other jurisdictions and identify the most effective.
<p>The Minister of Health, in discussion with stakeholders, should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage improved training for physicians regarding diet and physical activity. • Promote the use of physician counselling, including the use of prescriptions for exercise. • Bridge the gap between exercise professionals and the medical community by preparing and promoting qualified exercise professionals as a valuable part of the health care system and health care team. • Address vulnerable populations, such as Canadians of lower socio-economic status including Canada's Indigenous population, and pregnant women. 	

Observations:

The report is a progressive step towards addressing the increasingly important issue of obesity. Recommendations are broad and vary in nature including a call for regulations, taxation as well as support for health promotion and education measures. Several of the recommendations align with the CFPC advocacy on child and youth care from the [Red to Green](#) report (including ban on advertising and clearer nutritional labels).

Recommendations most relevant to family physicians include: improving training for physicians regarding health behaviours, promoting the use of physician counselling, and promoting exercise professions as a part of the health care system. These are very much in line with the principles of the [Patient's Medical Home](#) (PMH) that promotes comprehensive and preventative whole-person care, including management of health related behaviours and chronic care management.

The report highlights the influence of the social determinants of health on obesity in Canada and notes low-income Canadians, for example, often rely on unhealthy foods because these items are cheaper and sometimes all that is available. The report expresses the importance to addressing the social determinants of health when implementing interventions to address obesity and improve health. These recommendations align very well with the CFPC's [Best Advice Guide: Social Determinants of Health](#) released in 2014.

The report drafts a high-level road map for federal government. It remains to be seen if concrete action will follow. The CFPC continues to monitor the government's work on this file and will continue to provide advocacy from the family medicine perspective.

For further information:

Sherine Fahmy, Health Policy Analyst
Health Policy and Government Relations
(905) 629-0900 ext. 207; sfahmy@cfpc.ca