

Food Policies for Obesity Prevention

Effective food policies are needed to prevent obesity. The food policy is said that to be effective if it can successfully influence one of the key determinants of obesity i.e. diet. The interaction between human food preferences and the environment in which these food preferences are learned, expressed and reassessed provide a different perspective to understand how food policies work.

In a recent article, the four mechanisms through which the food policies can work are proposed. They include providing an enabling environment for healthy preference learning, overcoming barriers to the expression of healthy preferences, encouraging people to reassess existing unhealthy preferences and stimulating a positive food-systems response.

1) Food preference refers to what people say they want to eat, and in what quantities and frequency. This process of preference begins in early stages of life. To encourage a healthy preference of food learning early in life and by young children a powerful policy is needed.

2) The socioeconomic strata face a lot of barriers such as availability of healthy food and often the healthy foods are typically more expensive than less healthy food items. Hence a second policy is needed to remove these barriers and enable people to express healthy preferences.

3) People are less likely to choose when their prices rise and even less so when acceptable alternatives are available. In order to influence prices, availability and presentation of healthier options to consumers to reassess their preferences and make alternative choices, a policy is needed.

4) Food policies designed to affect consumer choices can also stimulate interdependent actions elsewhere in the food system e.g. mandatory food labeling. Hence a policy is needed to induce systemic dynamic positive feedback responses in the food system.

Three areas can be targeted to test the above mechanisms: school setting, economic instruments and nutritional labeling.

In all schools, actions should be designed to create a healthy preference - learning environment, through repeated and sustained exposure to healthy foods, comprehensive and consistent food standards, and skills and literacy-oriented nutrition education for children (including very young children), their teachers, and catering staff.

Economic instruments include targeted food taxes and catering staff. Taxes should be sufficiently large to stimulate consumers to reassess their purchase decisions. Subsidies should target populations that face affordability and access barriers to healthy foods that they like.

Smart food labeling should aim to maximize through repeated and sustained exposure to healthy foods, comprehensive and consistent food standards, and skills and literacy-oriented nutrition education for children (including very young children), their teachers, and catering staff. In order for nutrition labels to also have a direct effect on consumer choices, they should target the contexts and foods where specific groups of consumers are likely to respond to new information. To achieve both these goals, labels should be highly visible, understandable, and not misleading.

The design and assessment of population-based food policies can be enriched by the joining and combining of insights from behavioral research, economics, and public health.

Smart food policies can be expected to have a substantial and sustained effect on obesity over the long term