

2nd Phase Consultation response

Measuring What Matters

May 2023

We applaud the Commonwealth government for taking this progressive step towards prioritising the health and wellbeing of Australians. The development of a wellbeing framework for measuring and tracking national success will focus our national efforts more on equity, health and wellbeing, and what is important to the community (beyond GDP).

Social systems and equity are major drivers of obesity

The five policy themes mentioned in the Consultation Pack represent a broad range of important considerations, including the complex social systems that underpin our health and wellbeing. These same complex social system considerations are major factors in the prevention and treatment of obesity. Obesity affects all parts of society, but equity is a major issue with rates being higher in communities with relative socio-economic disadvantage, lower levels of education attainment, regional and remote areas, as well as Indigenous Australians. Most people understand that diet and exercise choices are relevant for obesity, however less recognised are the genetic, biological, social, economic, historical, and environmental causes of obesity. (Figure 1)

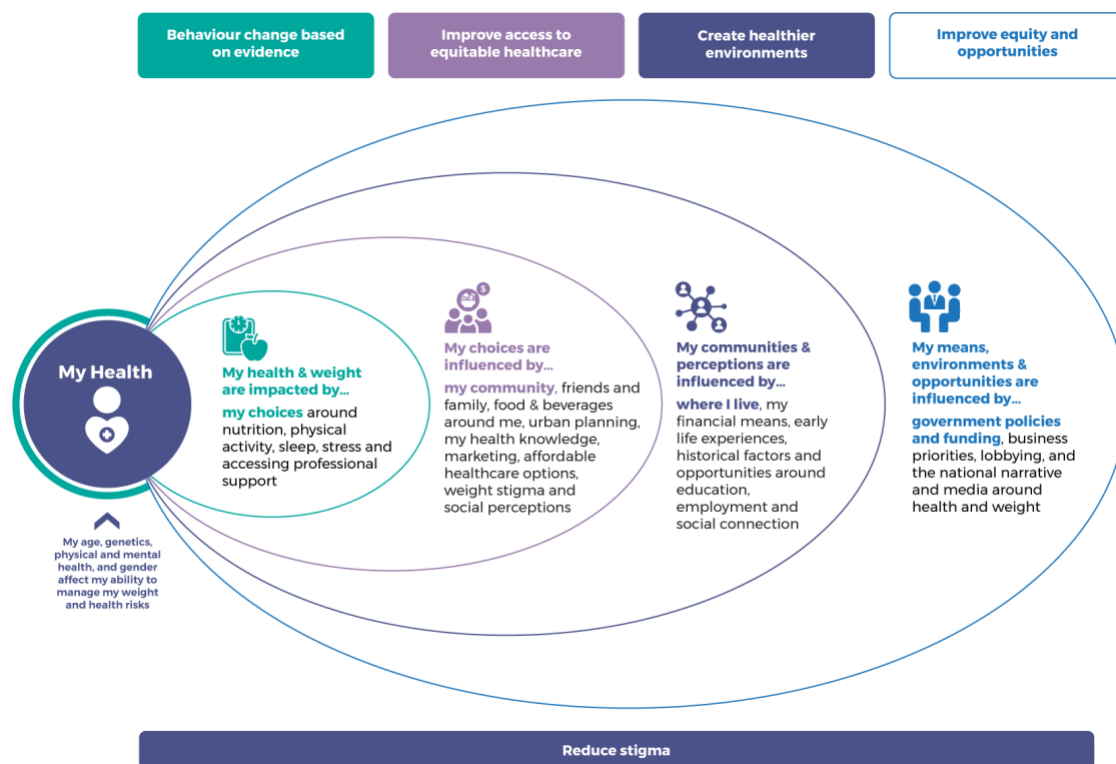


Figure 1: the socioeconomic impacts of obesity: a complex systems based approach is needed to reduce the prevalence and impact of obesity

The impacts of obesity such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, cancer, orthopaedic health and mental health, are significant and costly. There is much less funding allocated to obesity research, prevention and treatment which has the capacity to improve health and wellbeing through reducing the risk of these chronic illnesses.

Systems level thinking and a broad range of interventions are required to address obesity such as policy changes, healthier environments, reducing stigma and improved access to health care for those that experience the health impacts of obesity. Initiatives to reduce inequities in society can have flow on impacts for reducing obesity risk. In fact, because of the complex systems causes, the prevalence of obesity and obesity-related illness may be a useful metric in assessing action for Australia's health and wellbeing. To be clear, action focussing just on personal responsibility has not worked and exacerbates the issue through harmful stigma.

Obesity risks and health impacts are relevant to the policy themes

We support the governments approach to simplifying the OECD's framework, and recognise the value in being able to accurately evaluate our progress against a reasonable number of indicators. There is an opportunity to reduce duplication and improve clarity across the themes, for example employment opportunities and affordability are identified in multiple themes.

The five policy themes outlined in the consultation pack are relevant to obesity in several ways.

Prosperous - A growing, productive and resilient economy

Obesity and related health impacts affect productivity and financial security:

- Obesity-related illness and disability can have significant impacts on workforce attendance and productivity.
- Impediments on employment and career progression can also exist due to weight-based discrimination.
- Equitable investment in health literacy and food literacy at all stages in life will improve peoples capacity to manage their own health and participate in the workforce.
- A collaborative approach between health care and social care to inform a whole person approach will improve support for more disadvantaged communities.

Inclusive - A society that shares opportunities and enables people to fully participate

Weight stigma is a major barrier to health and inclusion

- Weight stigma is a major barrier to people with obesity accessing healthcare, as well as workplace and education participation and success.
- The health system lacks sufficient education, funding, resources, and referral pathways to provide supportive and effective healthcare to people whose weight is potentially impacting their health.
- Poor self esteem and mental health issues associated with stigma can lead to social isolation impairing a person's ability to be a community participant.
- The current typical framing of obesity in news media blames the individual, causing harm. Policies to protect people with obesity through improved media standards will help to reduce this stigma.
- Obesity has a higher prevalence in socioeconomic disadvantaged communities. Access to affordable, culturally appropriate healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity in respectful and inclusive environments will be beneficial to many health conditions including obesity.
- Affordable housing and other necessary living expenses allows for increased capacity for household spending on nutritious foods

Sustainable - A natural environment that is valued and sustainably managed in the face of a changing climate for current and future generations

There are co-benefits to reducing systems level obesity risks and improving environmental sustainability

- Reorienting our food systems towards fresh foods is co-beneficial to environmental health and obesity protection.
- Living environments supportive of active travel with green spaces for communities to be physically active in supports improved environmental health while creating opportunities for communities to be active and socially connected.

Cohesive - A safe and cohesive society that celebrates culture and encourages participation

Policies should protect the prioritisation of health and nutrition

- Policies and funding that promote healthy eating, physical activity, sleep and stress management with the community, provide people with better opportunities to protect themselves against all chronic conditions, including obesity.
- Childhood obesity often tracks through to adulthood, having a long-lasting negative effect on wellbeing indicators. Policies that protect children against persistent, targeted marketing of ultra-processed foods in all settings can be a protective measure against childhood obesity and related harms.
- Policies for children's health includes nutrition, physical activity, sleep and sedentary behaviour and are embedded and supported for deliver in practice.

Healthy - A society in which people feel well and are in good physical and mental health now and into the future

Obesity is a major driver of disease and disability in Australia

- The rise in obesity prevalence over the last 30 years is mainly a biological response to modern environments that promote unhealthier foods, stress, physical inactivity, and weight gain. Altering our environments and addressing the social determinants of health will ultimately benefit health and wellbeing.
- People living with obesity often need more support to manage their weight and any associated health issues, however often avoid healthcare support for any condition for fear of being shamed about their weight. A greater understanding of the science and lived experience of obesity in health care is required to provide the patient-centred care required to address patient needs and improve the health and wellbeing of people living with obesity.

More about the Obesity Collective

The Obesity Collective is the peak body for obesity in Australia. It is a national umbrella coalition with a vision to reduce the health and wellbeing impacts of obesity in Australia. Working together we raise awareness of the science and reality of obesity and promote evidence-based prevention and treatment action through a strong, cooperative and inclusive network.

Through leading research, cross-sector events and knowledge-sharing, the Obesity Collective increases community demand for and participation in a whole-of-society response to obesity. We work to change the narrative around obesity to reduce stigma, increase understanding of the science and shift focus to action beyond blaming the individual.

The Obesity Collective has over forty Advisers from across Australia. The group represents a diverse range of perspectives and expertise in preventive health, clinical healthcare, systems change, policy, lived experience and population health. We have over 900 members each of whom believes that obesity is an important societal topic that requires action to create healthier environments for everyone and better support for people who want to manage their health.