

Obesity Alliance Cymru Prevention Paper

Obesity

Wales is facing a public health crisis. Rates of overweight and obesity are climbing, resulting in diet related ill health across the population. Obesity costs the Welsh economy an estimated £3bn per year and is exacerbating huge avoidable pressures facing our NHS. Excess weight leads to a large number of diseases that cause significant mortality and morbidity, including type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD), liver disease, many types of cancer, musculoskeletal conditions and poor mental health.

In Wales 66% of men, 56% of womenⁱ and 27% of childrenⁱⁱ have a weight defined as overweight or obese.

Obesity affects the poorest in our society the worst, contributing to stark economic and health inequalities. Obesity among adults in the most deprived groups in Wales is 32%, compared with 20% in the least deprived groups.ⁱⁱⁱ 17.2% of children aged 4-5 in the Merthyr Tydfil had obesity in 2019 compared to 7.8% in the Vale of Glamorgan.^{iv}

Action

There is a strong systemic relationship between obesity and deprivation. National Policy which focuses on Population Health Measures is needed so that the NHS can work with local partners and engage with communities to deliver interventions to prevent and treat obesity across the social gradient with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to need.

We would like to see the All-Wales Weight Management Pathway is embedded in all Health Boards and across communities so that those people living with obesity can have equitable access to effective weight management particularly amongst socio-economic groups that are most under-represented in these services. These should include targeted outreach campaigns to encourage uptake from under-represented demographic groups and encouraging healthcare professionals to take-up training and develop opportunities to build their capability to discuss weight and health with patients.

Multi-year funding to health boards and other partners should also be maintained so that services can be delivered sustainably. Social prescribing would also be more beneficial if funded over multi years, particularly for initiatives like park run, and other local environments that promote physical activity.

Disease area 1 Diabetes

New analysis by Public Health Wales estimates that around 1 in 11 adults in Wales could be living with diabetes by 2035 if current trends continue. This would be an additional 48,000 people with the disease.

An increase like this would put significant additional pressure on health services. Diabetes related hospital spells cost the Welsh NHS an average of £4,518 per spell in 2021/22, not including spells requiring amputations. £105 million was spent on drugs to manage diabetes in Wales in 2022/23.

More than 200,000 people in Wales are already living with diabetes, around eight per cent of adults. However around 90 per cent of these cases have type 2 diabetes, over half of which could be prevented or delayed with behaviour changes. The main risk factors which people can take action on include having a healthier weight, eating a healthy diet, and being physically active. This is why

prevention programmes are so important to improve outcomes for patients as well as NHS resources.

Type 2 diabetes is a leading cause of sight loss and a contributor to kidney failure, heart attack and stroke. In 2021/22 alone, more than 560 people in Wales underwent amputations linked with diabetes.

The increasing prevalence of type 2 diabetes is therefore very concerning for the health and wellbeing of the people of Wales, as well as recognising the extra pressure this puts on health services.

Action

Public Health Wales leads the All-Wales Diabetes Prevention Programme, which is funded by the Welsh Government and delivered locally by dedicated trained healthcare support workers and dietetic leads working in primary care.

The programme supports people at higher risk of type 2 diabetes to make changes to their diet and to be more physically active. People are identified as being at risk through a blood test, called an HbA1c test, which measures a person's average blood sugar (glucose) levels over the last two to three months.

Eligible people in areas where the programme is being rolled-out are then referred to a healthcare support worker who will talk to them about what they can do to reduce their risk of developing type 2 diabetes. They can also be referred to additional sources of support.

Since the All-Wales Diabetes Prevention Programme launched in June 2022 it has offered support to more than 3,000 people across Wales. It is now being delivered in 32 of the 60 primary care clusters in Wales.

The independent process evaluation of the programme showed that nearly half of those who attended an appointment and completed a survey were unaware they were at risk of developing type 2 diabetes before receiving information about the programme. That is why it's so important for people to find out their level of risk for developing type 2 diabetes, and that the All-Wales Diabetes Prevention Programme continues.

Disease area 2 Heart Disease

Adults with diabetes are also 2-3 times more likely to develop heart and circulatory diseases and are nearly twice as likely to die from heart disease or stroke as those without diabetes. In the UK, one third of adults with diabetes die from a heart or circulatory disease.

340,000 people across Wales are living with heart and circulatory diseases, and 9,600 deaths each year are caused by these conditions. Heart and circulatory diseases remain a significant cause of ill health and death in Wales. They cause more than 1 in 4 deaths and there are around 340,000 people in Wales living with these conditions.⁵

We must ensure that where possible, we prevent people from developing heart and circulatory diseases, and that those living with these conditions have equitable access to timely, high-quality care and are supported to live well with their condition and encouraging a shift towards community-based support.

Action

We would like to improve detection and support people to manage conditions such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol which often precede heart and circulatory diseases through making every contact count and using community pharmacies and local authority settings to promote healthy lifestyles.

Examples from other countries have shown that community models of detection, diagnosis and management are effective.

Disease area 3 Liver Disease

Fatty liver disease diagnoses have increased 20-fold in the last two decades between 2002 and 2022. This has contributed to a 23% increase in liver disease mortality rates in 2019-21. 90% of liver disease is preventable and caused by obesity, alcohol misuse and viral hepatitis. Obesity is predicted to overtake alcohol as liver transplant driver.

Action

There is a credible risk of progress being reversed by the withdrawal of funding for the Liver Disease Implementation Network. The cessation of funding for GP education is likely to severely undermine implementation of the national pathway.

Disease area 4 Cancer

Around 4 in 10 UK cancer cases are preventable. Preventing cancer saves lives, saves money, and reduces pressure on the health service. As our population grows and ages, reducing the number of preventable cancers will be essential to avoid the need for ever-growing health budgets. By acting against key risk factors tobacco, alcohol and overweight and obesity to prevent ill health, governments across the UK could prevent nearly 37,000 cancers in total in the UK by 2040. Smoking and excess weight present the biggest preventable causes of cancer in Wales, causing around 3,100 and 1,000 cases of cancer respectively each year ⁶.

Cancer Research UK analysis projects that there will be almost as many people living with obesity as those with healthy weight in Wales by the 2040s, if current trends continue ⁷. In light of this, urgent action is needed to curtail this trend.

Action

Investment in childhood nutrition is also needed as a preventative action as it could prevent obesity later on in life. A child who is obese is around five times more likely to be obese in adulthood; acting early is critical. ⁸ Programmes such as Healthy Start that can help with childhood nutrition are vital, but more action is needed to raise awareness of the Programme as well as more training for health professionals.

We would like to see Wales explore devolved powers for restrictions on the advertising of HFSS products. The UK Government forecasts that implementing HFSS advertising restrictions (for TV and online) could reduce the number of children living with obesity by around 20,000 over the coming

⁶ Cancer Research UK, Statistics on preventable cancers. www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/risk/preventable-cancers#heading-Zero

⁷ Cancer Research UK (2022), Adult overweight and obesity prevalence projections for the UK. [Overweight and obesity prevalence projections for the UK, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland \(cancerresearchuk.org\)](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/overweight-and-obesity-prevalence-projections-for-the-uk-england-scotland-wales-and-northern-ireland)

⁸ Cancer Research UK. [Our policy on obesity and diet | Cancer Research UK](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/our-policy-on-obesity-and-diet)

years⁹. Despite these restrictions being passed into law in 2022, the UK Government has delayed introduction until October 2025. In light of this, the Welsh Government should advocate for these advertising restrictions to be implemented at pace.

Given the impact this area of legislation holds on obesity and child health, the Welsh Government should explore devolved powers within this field.

¹Public Health Wales (2020) 'National Survey for Wales 2019-20'. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-07/adult-lifestyle-national-survey-wales-april-2019-march-2020-390.pdf>

²Public Health Wales (2019) 'Child Measurement Programme for Wales'. <https://publichealthwales.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/child-measurement-programme/>

³Public Health Wales (2020) 'National Survey for Wales 2019-20'. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-07/adult-lifestyle-national-survey-wales-april-2019-march-2020-390.pdf>

⁴Public Health Wales (2019) 'Child Measurement Programme for Wales'. <https://publichealthwales.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/child-measurement-programme/>

⁵National survey for Wales data 2018/2019

⁶CRUK 'Longer, better lives: A Manifesto for Cancer Research and Care.'

⁹Department of Health and Social Care (2021). [Consultation outcome - Introducing further advertising restrictions on TV and online for products high in fat, salt and sugar: government response.](#)