

Health groups call on Government to act against obesity. 21 November 2007

The Public Health Association and the Obesity Action Coalition are calling for the Government to take concrete steps towards reducing New Zealand's epidemic of obesity.

The call is being made in the wake of the launch today by the Cancer Society of an international report linking obesity with six forms of cancer. It comes after a recent Ministry of Health report showed more than 50 percent of New Zealanders are obese or overweight.

"The evidence from the World Cancer Research Fund and American Institute for Cancer Research study is quite clear that only a small proportion of cancers are due to genetics and it is environmental factors which have been found to be more important. These are also the ones that, given commitment, can be modified," says Leigh Sturgiss, Director of the Obesity Action Coalition.

"The Government must now commit itself to radically altering New Zealand's obesogenic culture, to prevent related diseases such as cardiovascular conditions and type 2 diabetes crushing an ever-pressured health system."

The Director of the Public Health Association, Dr Gay Keating says studies have shown that for many, obesity is not a sign of eating too well but a sign of eating high-fat, high-sugar, low-nutrient, processed food that is cheap.

"There are low income neighbourhoods where it is difficult to buy healthy foods, where fast food outlets predominate and where there is a lack of green spaces to exercise."

Dr Keating and Ms Sturgiss are calling for the Government to make healthy food more affordable.

"Removing the GST on fruit and vegetables, providing healthy food vouchers to low income New Zealanders, and a "traffic light" labeling system on food so shoppers can easily identify nutritious products would repay the Government many times over in reduced health costs," says Dr Keating.

"The Government needs to ensure that there are regulations around television advertising of junk food aimed at children," says Leigh Sturgiss. "It is also vital the Government responds to the Health Select Committee report into obesity and type 2 diabetes at the end of November with conviction. The report's targets must be met to reduce obesity in children and youth, and narrow the present ethnic gaps in childhood obesity by 2015 so the rates are equally low in all ethnic groups."

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