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Obesity's steady rise demands concerted action

The latest adult obesity figures show that it's well past time for firmer measures against unhealthy foods that are causing disease and stretching health budgets, the Consumers Health Forum says.

Years of public education campaigns have failed to reverse the rise in adult obesity, according to statistics released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare today. They show that as at last year the national rate of overweight and obesity among adults was 63.4 per cent, higher even than the 62.8 per cent of four years ago.

"It is a disturbing state of affairs when we can identify the causes of much of modern society's ills yet governments fail to take the comprehensive measures needed to counter obesity --- measures like curbing the sale and promotion of unhealthy food and drink," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"Australia's high rate of overweight and obesity is costing us billions of dollars in health care expenditure and foregone earnings and tax. That is placing an ever swelling strain on health budgets given the spread of diseases like diabetes and cardiac conditions. Governments have an obligation to taxpayers and the community to take decisive action and implement a coordinated, well-funded, evidence-based national strategy to turn around this avoidable predicament.

"We need effective measures that support people to make and maintain healthy lifestyle changes in diet and physical activity.

"It is time for governments to put the interests of people's health ahead of corporate profits and oblige companies to act more responsibly.

"A sugar tax on sugar-sweetened beverages as proposed recently by the Grattan Institute would be a worthwhile start. While it is not the silver bullet in the fight against obesity, it would have a triple benefit of discouraging sugar-rich drinks, generating revenue for public health campaigns and spurring public awareness about healthy diet.

"We have now had many years of well-intentioned public awareness campaigns and school and community activity programs. These may have had some benefit for children but have failed to turn back the rise in obesity and overweight levels among adults.

Contact: Mark Metherell, 0429 111 986

Consumers shaping health

“Australians need only look at the record of success in the anti-tobacco effort to know that consistent, comprehensive public health campaigns work in turning people away from addictive, unhealthy products. The latest figures from the AIHW also published today, show a continued fall in smoking rates, down from 16.1 per cent in 2012 to 14.5 per cent last year. The continued decline took many years of action in the face of strong industry opposition. We are now reaping the benefits of lower cancer and cardiac disease.

“It’s time to do the same to counter obesity,” Ms Wells said.

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