



Consumers Health  
Forum OF Australia

SUBMISSION

**Targeted consultation with  
young consumers to inform the  
National Obesity Strategy**

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Consumers Health Forum of Australia 2020  
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inform the National Obesity Strategy.* Canberra,  
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## Overview

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The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) was commissioned by the Secretariat of the COAG Health Council's National Obesity Strategy to run a targeted consultation on the Draft National Obesity Strategy with young consumers to broaden engagement with this cohort and seek the insights and perspectives of young health consumers on the issue of overweight and obesity.

The consultation was guided by the questions provided by the National Obesity Strategy Secretariat through their consultant The Social Deck, and was co-facilitated by CHF policy staff and Youth Health Forum (YHF) member/CHF young board member, Roxxanne MacDonald.

The questions were provided to participants several days before the consultation so that they could reflect on their own behaviours and decision-making processes, and what they perceive to be the key factors influencing rates of overweight and obesity amongst young Australians.

This report outlines the themes, barriers and strategies that emerged during the consultation and the feedback and recommendations made about the strategies and priorities outlined in the National Obesity Strategy Summary Consultation Paper.

## Participants

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CHF recruited a diverse group of 7 young consumers between the ages of 21 and 26 from the YHF network to attend a two-hour focus group. Attendees included individuals who:

- Identify as obese
- Identify as LGBTIQ+
- Identify as having a disability
- Are from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background
- Have lived in a rural or remote location
- Are or have been carers

## Outcomes of the Targeted Consultation

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### *Themes*

During the discussion, participants identified the following issues that they felt were important to ensuring that a strategy on overweight and obesity meets the needs of young people.

#### **Intersection between physical and mental health**

Participants highlighted the need to consider the intersection between physical health and mental health, noting that the impacts occur both ways. For example, poor mental health can make it difficult to maintain a healthy weight, and at the same time people who are overweight

or obese can experience weight-related stigma, low self-confidence and anxiety. Participants discussed the need for targeted approaches for people with mental illness to help them eat well and engage in physical activity in ways that don't induce anxiety or attribute blame.

Participants felt that specific actions in the strategy to support the mental health and self-esteem of young people would also have benefits for their physical health. Additionally, mental health outcomes can be improved by providing young people with relevant, practical information about nutrition and healthy eating, and supporting people to engage in a physical activity they enjoy. In particular, the social interactions that come from participating in team sports and group activities were highlighted as a benefit and a motivating factor for young people.

Participants also noted that while access to allied health services can often be expensive and out of reach for many young people, some had found value in sessions with a dietician or exercise physiologist. It was agreed that access to this kind of help would benefit young people who are struggling to maintain a healthy lifestyle or weight. Pathways to receive MBS funding for these services exist, however the participants did not think that these were well understood or promoted. They feel that there is greater scope for GPs and allied health professionals to design a plan tailored to the holistic health needs of a young person on a mental health care plan.

### **Sustainability**

The participants recognised the significant impact of their food choices on the environment so were keen to see a strong focus on sustainability throughout the strategy. Young people are extremely concerned about climate change and the consequences that the kind of food that we grow and produce and the methods we use to produce them will have on their health and their ability to live a healthy life into the future.

There is an opportunity to harness the passion of young people by linking the issue of food choices to sustainability. Participants believed that sustainability is a factor that impacts the choices young people make about what products to buy and what foods to eat. Young people want to live sustainably and minimise their ecological footprint.

Participants suggested that the issues of sustainability and the environmental consequences of our food choices should be introduced at a young age in an active, engaging and fun way. This would make it easier for young people to understand these complex issues and enable them to make healthy and sustainable choices in the future.

### **Early intervention**

Participants felt there was a significant opportunity to improve education about healthy food and food preparation skills through the early schooling years. Participants suggested the strategy needed to take a cross-department approach working across Health and Education Departments at both the Commonwealth and State and Territory levels.

There was also discussion about the gendered nature of cooking, with it being seen by young people as a feminine activity, and this means boys are less likely to develop cooking skills at

home. By starting education on food and cooking in schools at an earlier age it could normalise it before those stereotypes become ingrained and therefore some of the gender bias could be overcome.

Participants were also keen for the education young people receive to include a focus on where food comes from, gardening and how to grow your own food. This would help young people to build a relationship with food, rather than just being told what to eat which is likely to be less effectively.

Additionally, there was support for education to start even earlier, in the first 1000 days. Noting that this is a time when there is lots of contact with health providers, participants saw this time as an opportunity to educate parents and set both the parents and the child up for success as early as possible.

### **Communication strategies**

The discussion covered a wide range of different communication approaches, including targeted messages to different communities and the use of technology to make messages engaging, interactive and able to reach as many people as possible.

The following list includes some examples of the types of communication strategies that the participants felt were effective for promoting healthy eating and exercise, particularly with young people:

- Videos from celebrity chefs and personal trainers
- Infographics that explain how much exercise you need to do to work off certain foods, or that show portion sizes of certain foods alongside everyday objects
- Mobile apps that provide information in an interactive format
- Targeted campaigns that focus on the needs of specific communities (broad marketing campaigns are likely to be less effective)
- Messaging for CALD communities that recognises the value of traditional foods and balances that with a focus on health

### **Creating safe, welcoming environments**

Participants noted that while most of them participated in sport as young children, their engagement in those activities dropped off during high school or university due to a range of factors. They felt this was a common experience for many young people and that it was difficult to re-engage in sport or physical activity once they had that break or it was no longer part of their routine.

Factors that contributed to the break in participation and prevented re-engagement included a lack of confidence, anxiety and a concern about looking silly. The competitive nature of sport can also be off putting for some people. These factors combined with other commitments

(academic studies, work etc.) starting to take up more time mean it is harder to prioritise exercise as you get older.

Participants suggested a number of strategies to encourage young people to take up sport or physical activity during that stage of life. The need to create safe spaces for different communities to exercise was highlighted strongly. In particular, the gendered nature of exercise and gyms is challenging for young queer and trans people and can make them feel uncomfortable. By having specific spaces and classes for these communities they are more likely to feel safe and supported to participate.

Additionally, the actions of national sporting organisations were seen as important for setting a strong example. Inclusive language and activities at the highest level must be accompanied by ground up efforts to make local clubs welcoming places for everyone. Highlighting sporting role models from these communities helps young people see what is possible.

Participants also felt that the social connections that come with team sports are a key motivation for participation, and that a stronger focus on this benefit would help encourage more people to get involved. It was also suggested that building connections between schools and local sporting clubs could help increase participation and mean engagement in sport would continue beyond the school years.

Finally, young people highlighted the need for other types of activities other than competitive sport. Some people are more suited to activities that are social and active but not competitive (e.g. rock climbing) and so a range of options are needed.

### **Holistic approach to healthy lifestyles**

Participants were strongly supportive of a focus on healthy lifestyles and wellness rather than weight. Their view was that people come in different shapes and sizes and it is better to focus on overall health rather than just the number on a scale. Participants also felt that eating well, exercising and connecting with friends are all more motivating factors than achieving a specific weight goal.

There was strong discussion about the impact of some medications on weight gain, particularly mental health medications. Participants felt that focussing solely on weight may encourage people to not take medications that they needed for their overall health and wellbeing.

### *Barriers*

#### **Reducing cost**

Participants all agreed that cost was a barrier to both healthy eating and engaging in sport or physical activity. In relation to food choices, while participants knew what the healthy option was, the fact that the unhealthy option was almost always significantly cheaper definitely influenced their choices and behaviours.

Participants noted that the cost of fruit and vegetables was increasing and there was some scepticism about whether this was being manipulated by the major supermarkets. Noting the

limited number of players in the supermarket industry in Australia, participants felt there was some price manipulation and that it is hard to get a sense of what the true value of fresh fruit and vegetables is.

An example was when there is a 'hype' or 'trend' around a certain food, supermarkets often respond by increasing the price of that item which becomes a barrier to buying those foods. At the same time there are always deals and discounts on unhealthy options, making it difficult to make healthy choices.

Participants suggested the need for free, low cost or subsidised physical activity programs for children, adolescents and young people as the cost of participation, equipment and travel can be prohibitive for many people. This could include subsidies for sporting club and gym memberships, especially in low socioeconomic areas.

Another example of how to overcome cost barriers was expanding access low cost food education and preparation classes and programs. Participants had positive experiences with programs that helped children and young people learn how to cook and prepare healthy foods (e.g. the Jamie Oliver's Ministry of Food program is low cost for those with a Centrelink card in some areas).

Finally, participants also noted the need for broader structural changes to make accessing healthy food and activities affordable. It was noted that when living on Centrelink payments it is simply not possible to cover the costs of a gym membership or sports club fees. Participants felt that raising the rate of Newstart would give people the ability to make healthy food choices and engage in sport and physical activity.

### **Environmental and Structural supports**

Participants spoke about the importance of incidental exercise to support living a healthy lifestyle, and that broader structural considerations impacted on the individual's ability and willingness to incorporate this into their lives.

Community safety and perceptions of safety, particularly around public transport, are once example that was highlighted in the discussion as being critically important. Participants were supportive of self-defence classes, especially for girls, as one way to improve feelings of confidence and safety. This is an example of an approach that is empowering for communities that feel threatened e.g. women, queer people etc.

Climate change was also raised a key structural issue that needs to be recognised in the strategy. With more extreme weather predicted in the coming years this will impact on people's ability to exercise and go outside. Heat waves, rain, and extreme cold snaps are all barriers to participation. Participants felt we will see a shift to more exercising indoors, and therefore there is a need to engage with local councils so that indoor facilities can be accessible in all areas, particularly for low income communities.

Participants also noted that when designing community facilities, issues of weather and climate need to be considered alongside practicality and usability. For example, the maintenance of bike paths and street lighting is important to ensure people can feel safe and



comfortable to exercise outside. Equally, when new equipment is being installed the provision of adequate shade and lighting is important for usability.

### **Unclear and inconsistent information**

A key theme emerging from the discussions was that there is some much conflicting information about what is healthy and what is not, and this makes it hard for consumers to make healthy choices. In particular, conflicting advice from healthy authorities about what to avoid (e.g. sugar, salt, fat) adds to the confusion.

Participants were aware of the health star rating system but expressed low levels of trust in the rankings it gives. Young people are sceptical about how the rankings are determined and the role of corporations in promoting their own products.

Concerns were also expressed about the impact of advertising and packaging to make things look healthy when they are not or packaging that encourages consumers to eat bigger portions. Participants felt there is a need for regulation to make packaging more consistent and easier for consumers to understand.

### **Convenience**

Convenience was a critical issue for young people as they are often time poor and also needing low cost food and activity options. Participants found that it is difficult to motivate themselves to cook for one person if they are living alone or in a share house. When motivation is low takeaway often becomes an easier and cheaper option

In areas where shops aren't open late participants found it hard to find time to do grocery shopping around work hours. With farmers markets only open at limited times and often involving longer travel to get there, they were seen as a less convenient option. Additionally, not all consumers felt confident in their food knowledge and preparation skills to know what produce will last and how to store things.

Shopping online is a strategy some participants employed in order to not get distracted by promotions and advertising, but it was noted that some supermarkets charge more for online shopping, making price a barrier. Grocery boxes that get delivered to your door can make it easier, but they are also very expensive.

Participants commented that the rise of restaurant delivery services has made it much easier to get takeaway and not realise how much you are spending or eating. Young people felt they don't think of these services being take away in the same way and so may use them more often. It was suggested that regulations to make delivery companies pay drivers an adequate wage would drive up the cost of those services and make it more of a barrier to choosing unhealthy options as frequently.

Finally, young people felt there was a need for specific initiatives to make healthy food cheaper, as well as campaigns to help people have the skills and motivation to cook at home.

# Feedback on the Consultation Paper

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## *Important elements of the priority areas*

Participants felt the focus on resilience and sustainability in the food system is very important. They were pleased to see recognition of food waste as a big issue and wanted to ensure that the strategy recognised all the food thrown out by supermarkets as well as individuals.

The focus on support for families and early intervention was also strongly supported as they felt that teaching children about healthy eating, cooking and exercise at a young age can embed those habits early and set them up for a healthy life.

The participants were also supportive of the focus on mobilising people and communities but felt this needed to reflect a local approach that allows local communities to develop their own solutions. Participants highlighted the need to be careful to avoid stigmatising individuals and groups when reaching out to vulnerable communities. They felt strongly that the approach must be culturally competent, respectful and involve co-design with local communities.

## *Suggested changes and additions*

Participants felt there was too much focus on individual education rather than structural changes like safe city design and transport in the consultation paper. They were keen to ensure the strategy acknowledged that health and weight are social concepts and are not as individual as they are often described. Participants wanted to see a strong focus on supporting communities with structural change for the long term.

The discussion also raised the need for more actions and information about product labelling so that consumers can make informed choices. This should include information about where ingredients come from and needs to be presented in an accessible and clear format.

Finally, participants felt that the strategy, as presented through the consultation paper, included information at a high level but didn't give specifics about how to find practical information or take action. Participants felt there was a need include information on services, facilities and online platforms to facilitate informed decision making.

# Recommendations

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## Focus on health and wellbeing

1. The overarching focus of the strategy should be to promote and support the adoption of healthy behaviours rather than making the emphasis weight loss.

## Clearer information

2. The strategy should guide clear and consistent messaging so that consumers can have a greater understanding and awareness of what is and is not 'healthy food'.
3. Make changes to product labelling and advertising to be consistent with clear messages about healthy food, as well as promoting messages across multiple platforms, targeting messages to specific communities and providing education through schools.
4. Improve referral pathways and access to funding for young mental health consumers to access allied health care services that support them in achieving a healthier lifestyle.

## Local consultations for appropriate designs

5. Ensuring different age groups and cultural communities are consulted about new activities and facilities in their local public spaces. Plans should be designed to be age and culturally appropriate and meet the preferences of the local community.

## Addressing price barriers to healthy food options

6. Reduce the cost of fresh fruit and vegetables compared to unhealthy options and regulate to raise the cost of unhealthy food options.
7. Invest in low or no cost programs to provide cooking skills and education to young people, with a focus on schools and low-income groups.

## Ensure access to affordable, welcoming spaces for sport and physical activity

8. Ensure affordable access to indoor spaces for exercise in local communities including dedicated spaces for communities that feel marginalised, and provide financial support to enable low income individuals and families to engage in sport and physical activity
9. Incorporate active and safe travel principles into city planning and design
10. Develop targeted programs to support young people to continue participating in sport and exercise through high school and university, including providing non-competitive options.