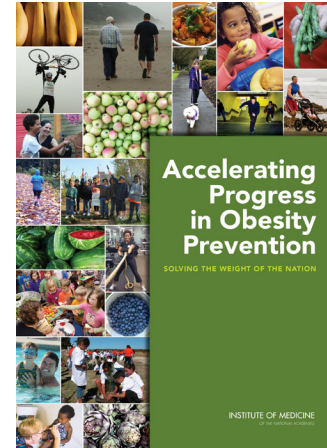


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Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention

Solving the Weight of the Nation



Two-thirds of adults and almost one-third of children in the United States are overweight or obese, representing young and old, urban and rural, and majority and minority populations. This epidemic of excess weight is associated with major causes of chronic disease, disability, and death. Obesity-related illness is estimated to carry an annual cost of \$190.2 billion.

These staggering human and economic costs, along with the difficulties of treating obesity and the slow progress made in reversing national obesity trends, underscore the urgent need to accelerate progress in obesity prevention. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to identify catalysts to speed progress in obesity prevention. The IOM committee appointed to this task presents its findings in its report, *Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention: Solving the Weight of the Nation*.

Effective Responses to a Complex Health Problem

The committee evaluated hundreds of prior strategies for their promise in accelerating obesity prevention over the next decade. It mapped how the most promising interacted with, reinforced, or slowed each other's progress. This "systems approach" way of thinking allowed the committee to identify recommendations and understand how they would be important individually and, when implemented collectively, would further strengthen efforts to prevent obesity. The result was the series of goals that follow.

- Make physical activity an integral and routine part of life
- Create food and beverage environments that ensure that healthy food and beverage options are the routine, easy choice

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- Transform messages about physical activity and nutrition
- Expand the roles of health care providers, insurers, and employers
- Make schools a national focal point

In addition, the committee identified related recommendations, strategies, and potential implementation actions organized around five critical environments—physical activity, food and beverage, message, health care and work, and school—that urgently need reform in order to accelerate progress (see Detailed Information).

Implementing the Recommendations

The report stresses that, because obesity is such a complex and stubborn problem, a bold, sustained, and comprehensive approach is needed. Action must occur at all levels—individual, family, community, and the broader society—and ongoing assessment of progress is key as efforts move forward (see Figure).

The report emphasizes the need to identify and engage leaders at all levels and across all sectors of society who can act to prevent obesity, and it challenges everyone to assess their assets and identify contributions they can make to create meaningful societal change and accelerate progress in preventing obesity.

Obesity risks are often disproportionate among minority, low-income, less educated, and rural populations, due to inequitable distribution of health promotion resources and community risk factors that contribute to disparities in obesity prevalence. For example, some communities may have no safe places to walk or play, no shops offering affordable, healthy food, and widespread advertisements for unhealthy food and beverages. Because these inequities often result from policy decisions, change will require targeted efforts to promote and support robust, long-term community engagement and civic participation.

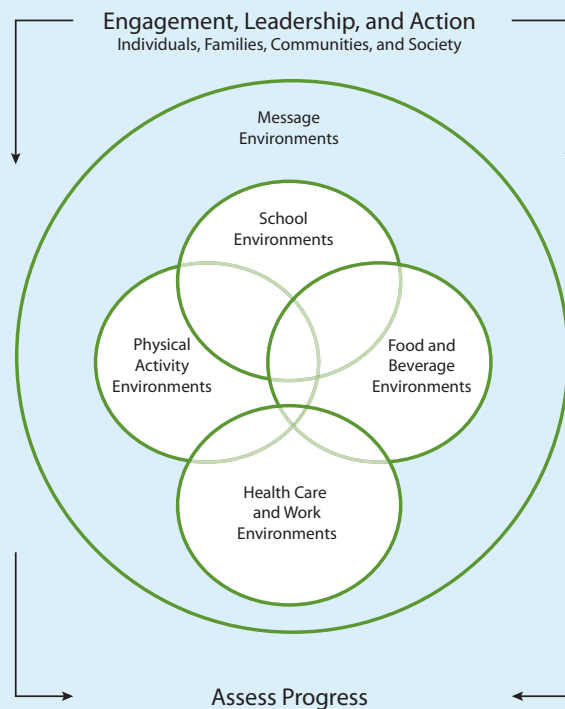
Promoting Physical Activity and Healthy Food Choices

For too many, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is increasingly limited by complicated and interconnected factors, such as insufficient access to sidewalks and affordable healthy foods and overexposure to advertising that promotes unhealthy foods.

To improve their physical activity, people must be empowered to integrate daily physical activity into their lives, as recommended by the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*, through increased access to places for such activity. And to improve their eating habits, they also must be empowered to make healthy choices through expanded access to healthy, affordable foods, as recommended by the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Communities, transportation officials, community planners, health professionals, and the government at the local, state, and national levels must prioritize promotion of physical activity by substantially increasing public access to places that allow such activity. In other words, all of

FIGURE: Comprehensive Approach of the Committee



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these key actors should make physical activity a health priority. The physical and built environments must be improved—for example, converting an unused railroad bed into a walking/running/biking trail—and community design revamped to ensure access to spaces where the public can engage in physical activity.

Additionally, governments and private sector decision makers need to make concerted efforts to reduce unhealthy food and beverage options while substantially increasing access to healthier food and beverages at competitive prices. The overconsumption of sugar-sweetened beverages must be reduced; calories substantially slashed in meals served to children while the number of affordable, healthier menu options is boosted significantly; and governments need to provide incentives to encourage supermarkets and other food retailers to place stores in underserved areas.

Supporting Obesity Prevention

Other equally important parts of obesity prevention involve changing the message environment, health care, and the workplace. Messages about physical activity and nutrition from all sources must be transformed, and health care professionals and employers should be urged to expand their role in obesity prevention.

Congress, the White House, federal policy makers, and foundations should dedicate substantial funds to develop and implement a sustained national social marketing campaign on physical activity and nutrition. Carefully targeted, cultur-

ally appropriate messages should be aimed at key audiences with clear action items that will result in achieving and maintaining healthy weights.

It is urgent for food, beverage, restaurant, and media industries to take voluntary action to improve marketing aimed at children aged 2 to 17. All food and beverages specifically marketed to these children should support a diet that accords with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* to prevent obesity and risk factors associated with chronic disease.

Efforts to prevent obesity also need to include to a much greater extent what happens in the workplace and doctors' offices. Health care providers should adopt standards of practice for preventing, screening, diagnosing, and treating overweight and obese patients of all ages to help them achieve and maintain healthy weight and avoid obesity-related complications. Employers should establish, implement, and monitor policy initiatives that support wellness.

Transforming Schools

Schools are uniquely positioned to be a national focal point for obesity prevention because children spend up to half of their waking hours in school and consume between one-third and one-half of their daily calories there.

State education agencies and local school districts should ensure that students—from kindergartners to high school seniors—have adequate opportunities to participate in 60 minutes of physical activity per school day.



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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Implementing the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* in schools would increase the consumption of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains; reduce sugar-sweetened beverages, fats, and added sugars; and ensure age-appropriate portions.

Conclusion

The committee's recommendations, when implemented together, could profoundly reshape the environments where people live, work, play, and learn. If leaders across all levels of society are engaged and implement this comprehensive approach within the next decade, physical activity will become an integral and routine part of most people's lives, and adults and children will have opportunities for enjoyable physical movement anywhere they spend time. Healthy foods will become the most visible, attractive, and easy-to-obtain options anywhere food is sold or served. The balance of information in the media that surround us will shift away from sedentary pursuits and unhealthy foods and toward active lifestyles and healthy foods. Patients will leave their health care providers' offices with more knowledge about obesity prevention that can be put into action. Employers will play a pivotal role in increasing physical activity and healthy food options for employees. And schools will become nutrition and wellness centers. The force of each action, compounded by the collective ability to accelerate and strengthen each other's impact, can profoundly improve the nation's health. 

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