



Major Conditions Strategy consultation

Tackling the risk factors for ill health

Instructions

The condition groups we are focusing on are often driven by preventable risk factors, with nearly half (42%) of ill health and early death being due to them. This includes tobacco, alcohol, physical activity and diet-related risk factors. Action on preventable risk factors is also central to our work on tackling health disparities, since people living in more deprived areas are more likely to partake in these behaviours.

Do you have any suggestions on how we can support people to tackle these risk factors?

Yes

How can we support people to tackle these risk factors? (Please do not exceed 500 words)

Inadequate diets during pregnancy and the early years have been established as a recognised risk factor for obesity and non-communicable diseases. Suboptimal feeding practices, characterised by the consumption of commercial milk formula, commercial baby and toddler foods, as well as treat and snack foods, contribute to unhealthy dietary habits that promote a preference for sweet tastes, excessive energy intake, and weight gain. Furthermore, an expanding body of evidence indicates an association between diets dominated by ultra-processed foods during pregnancy and childhood, and obesity or adiposity measures in children.

Ensuring a supportive environment that facilitates and encourages optimal nutrition is essential to improve the diets of pregnant women, infants and young children and prevent ill health. Women who want to breastfeed should be enabled and supported to do so, and all parents and carers, including those on low incomes, should be able to afford to feed their babies and toddlers nutritious diets based on minimally processed foods and drinks.

The dominance of commercial baby food and drink products, many of which are ultra-processed, in the diets of the UK's infants and young children is ultimately a food system issue and should be tackled by the UK Government as part of a cohesive food policy that addresses the whole food system, encompassing poverty, inequalities, and access to healthy and sustainable diets.

To prevent ill health, and tackle dietary inequalities, targeted actions aimed at improving diets in the early years are warranted. We strongly recommend that the UK Government undertake the following actions:

1. Acknowledge the NOVA classification and update public health recommendations on infant and young child feeding to explicitly address food processing.
2. Regulate and enforce the composition, labelling and marketing of commercial baby and toddler foods and drinks, utilising the WHO Europe Nutrient and Promotion Profile Model.
3. Ensure parents/carers have easy access to independent information and practical guidance and support on complementary feeding and feeding from one to five years of age. This requires proper investment in the health visiting service and Family Hubs (or equivalent services).
4. Ensure parents/carers on low incomes can afford to feed their infants and young children nutritious diets based on minimally processed foods and drinks by reforming the Healthy Start scheme for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
5. Enable women who want to breastfeed by following through on existing commitments to increase access to breastfeeding support, extending that support universally, and upgrading and enforcing the UK law in line with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes.
6. Invest in research on UPF consumption in the early years, including regular collection of comprehensive data on maternal, infant and young child feeding, and focused research on additives in commercial baby and toddler foods.
7. Acknowledge and promote the environmental benefits of diets based on minimally processed foods.

More information can be found in our report, *Ultra-processed foods (UPF) in the diets of infants and young children in the UK*, available here: <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/upfs-marketed-for-infants-and-young-children>