

# The Telegraph

## 40,000 deaths a year due to junk food, says health watchdog Nice

More than 40,000 Britons are dying unnecessarily every year because of high levels of salt and fat in their diets, the Government's public health watchdog Nice has warned.



Rose Prince loves chips, but makes her own healthy version Photo: JONATHAN LODGE

By Rebecca Smith, Medical Editor

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The [National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence](#) (Nice) says that unhealthy foods have wreaked a “terrible toll of ill [health](#)” on the nation and placed a “substantial” strain on the economy. For the first time, the organisation publishes landmark guidance on how to prevent the “huge number of unnecessary deaths” from conditions such as heart disease that are linked to the consumption of ready meals and processed food.

It calls for sweeping changes to food production and government policy to encourage lifestyle changes, and to reduce significantly the amount of salt and saturated fat the nation consumes.

It says “toxic” artificial fats known as trans fats, which have no nutritional value and are linked to heart disease, should be banned. The organisation says that ministers should consider introducing legislation if food manufacturers failed to make their products healthier.

Nice says it has brought together all the available evidence to illustrate the link between unhealthy food and public health, partly in response to increasing concern about obesity in Britain, particularly among children.

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It says there are about five million people in the country suffering the effects of cardiovascular disease — a “largely avoidable” condition that includes heart attacks, heart disease and stroke — and that it causes 150,000 deaths annually. Nice says 40,000 of these deaths could be prevented, and hundreds of millions of pounds saved, if its measures were introduced.

The guidance, which was commissioned by the Department of Health, also recommends that:

- Low-salt and low-fat foods should be sold more cheaply than their unhealthy counterparts, through the use of subsidies if necessary;
- Advertising of unhealthy foods should be banned until after 9pm and planning laws should be used to restrict the number of fast food outlets, especially near schools;
- The Common Agricultural Policy should focus more on public health, ensuring farmers are paid to produce healthier foods;
- Action should also be taken to introduce a “traffic light” food labelling system, even though the European Parliament recently voted against this;
- Local authorities must act to encourage walking and cycling and public sector caterers must provide healthier meals;

- All lobbying of the Government and its agencies by the food and drink industry should be fully disclosed.

Prof Klim McPherson, the Chairman of the Nice Guidance Development Group and professor of epidemiology at Oxford University, said: “Where food is concerned, we want the healthy choice to be the easy choice. Going even further, we want the healthy choice to be the less expensive, more attractive choice.

“Put simply, this guidance can help the Government and the food industry to take action to prevent huge numbers of unnecessary deaths and illnesses caused by heart disease and stroke.” The average person in Britain consumes more than eight grams of salt a day. The body only requires one gram to function. Targets are already in place to reduce salt consumption to six grams by 2015 and this should be extended to three grams by 2050, the guidance says.

Nice says children should consume considerably less salt than adults and that, because the bulk of salt in their diets comes from prepared food such as bread, cereal, soups, meat and cheese products, manufacturers have a significant role to play in reducing it.

The organisation says that most consumers did not even notice a difference in taste if salt levels were reduced by

5-10 per cent a year because their taste buds adjusted.

Prof Mike Kelly, the public health director at Nice, added: “This isn’t about telling individuals to choose salad instead of chips — it’s about making sure that the chips we all enjoy occasionally are as healthy as possible.

“That means making further reductions in the salt, trans fats and saturated fats in the food we eat every day.”

Betty McBride, the director of policy and communications at the British Heart Foundation, said:

“Creating an environment that makes healthy choices easy is vital. Government, the health service, industry and individuals must all play their part. We must see industry making major efforts now to reformulate products with less saturated fat.

“Cutting our ‘sat fat’ intake would have a major impact on heart disease.”

Prof Sir Ian Gilmore, president of the Royal College of Physicians, added: “The Nice guidance demonstrates conclusively why we need to change radically our approach to this vast and silent killer.

“Many of the diet-related recommendations made by Nice have the added benefit of costing the public purse little to nothing, while creating an opportunity to reduce the tens of billions of pounds of associated costs the UK loses every year to heart disease.”

While the guidance was welcomed by health experts, representatives of the food and drink industry said significant progress on salt and fat had already been taken.

The Food and Drink Federation accused Nice of being “out of touch with the reality”. Julian Hunt, its director of communications, said: “We are surprised that Nice has found the time and the money to develop guidance that seems to be out of touch with the reality of what has been happening for many years.

“The food industry is leading the world when it comes to voluntarily changing the recipes of popular food brands so that they are lower in salt, fat or sugar; introducing better-for-you choices at the same price as standard lines; and improving the quality of nutrition information available on packs.”



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