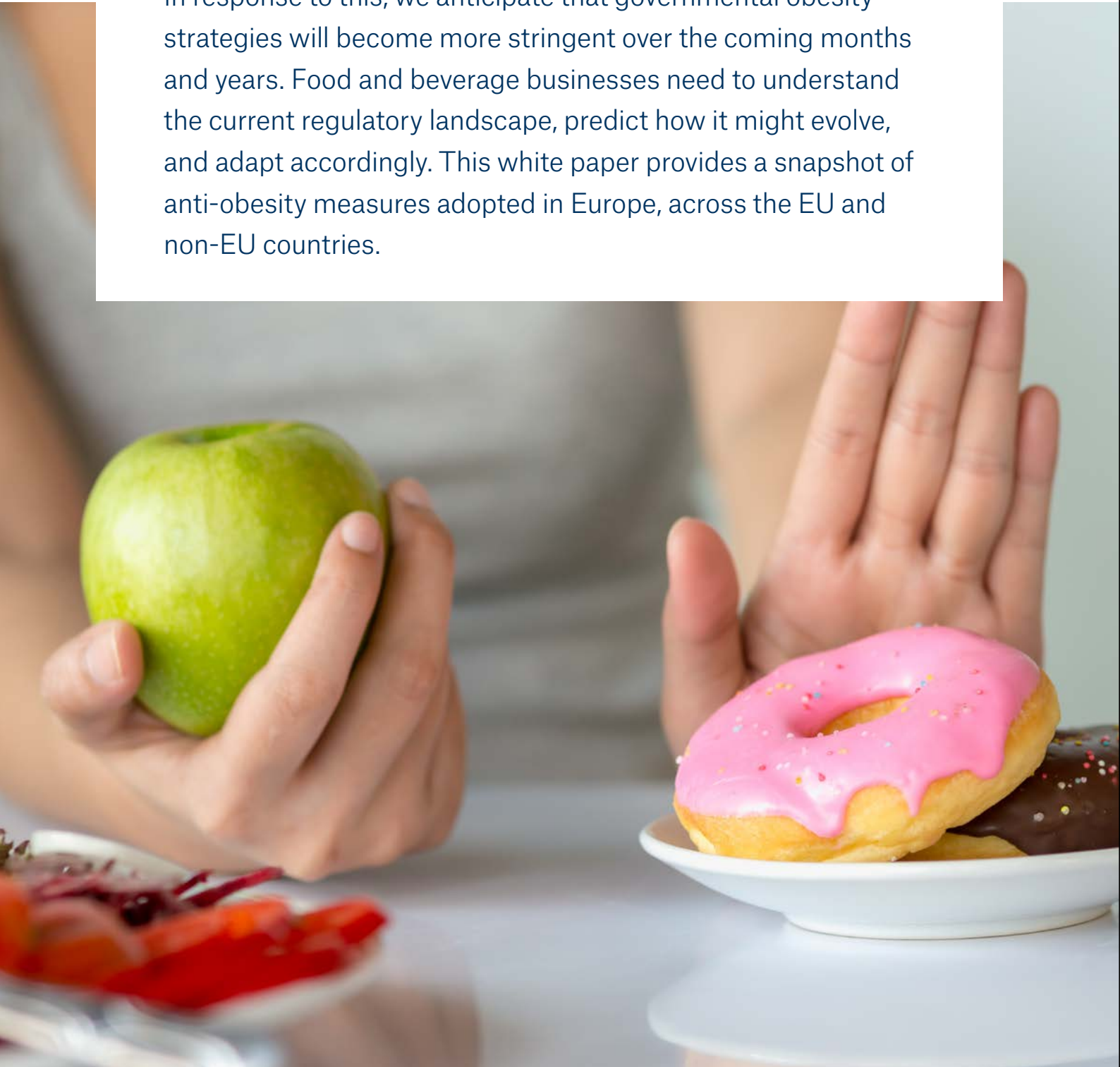


In focus

COVID-19's influence
on European obesity
strategies



COVID-19 brought the ongoing global obesity issue into sharper focus when it became clear that overweight and obese people experienced more complications and higher mortality rates. In response to this, we anticipate that governmental obesity strategies will become more stringent over the coming months and years. Food and beverage businesses need to understand the current regulatory landscape, predict how it might evolve, and adapt accordingly. This white paper provides a snapshot of anti-obesity measures adopted in Europe, across the EU and non-EU countries.



The obesity crisis and COVID-19

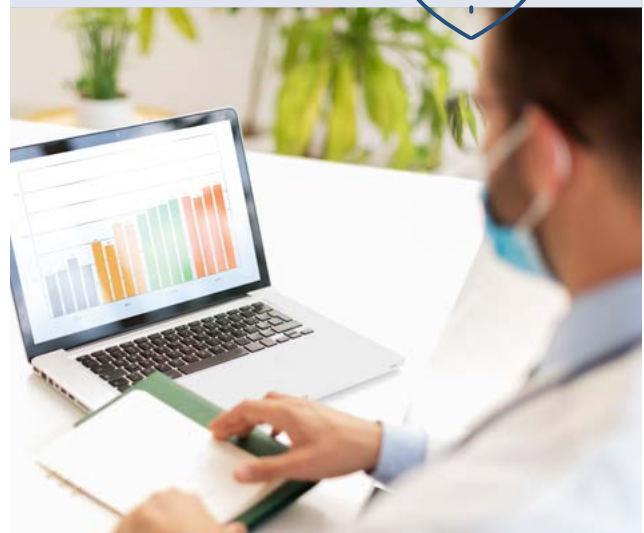
According to World Health Organization (WHO) figures, worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975¹. The effects of obesity on health and life expectancy are well established; it is linked to certain types of cancer as well as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has also become apparent that obese patients with the virus were more likely to be admitted to intensive care and experience higher rates of mortality².

Tackling the obesity crisis was already a high priority for many nations; COVID-19 adds another layer of urgency to the situation. It's highly likely that governmental obesity strategies will become more stringent, which will almost certainly have a knock-on effect for food business operators across Europe.

This white paper looks at current regulations associated with obesity in the EU (spotlighting France and Poland) as well as the UK and Switzerland. It also considers wider governmental responses to rising obesity levels. All these factors will impact the food and beverage industry, driving change in multiple areas from advertising and labelling to the formulation of products.

Emerging evidence based on experience from other viral infections and new studies suggest that overweight and obesity seem to be risk factors for worse outcomes in those who are infected by COVID-19².

World Obesity



How European nations are tackling obesity

Initiatives in the EU

Numerous EU-level initiatives have been published to inform and educate consumers about nutritional values and the impact dietary choices can have on health. One area that receives a lot of attention is front-of-pack labelling.

In December 2020, a draft conclusion on front-of-pack nutrition labelling, nutrient profiles and origin labelling³ was issued by the Council of the European Union. This document supports the EU's commitment to facilitating healthy and sustainable diets, emphasising the importance of reformulating foods to reduce levels of salt, sugar and saturated fat. It also considers the resumption of discussions to restrict use of nutrition or health claims on foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS foods), in accordance with Regulation (EC) No. 1924/2006.

There is no set timeline for the EU's implementation of any outcomes of this consultation. However, the food and beverage industry is encouraged to play a proactive role in providing healthier products. Measures may include reviewing front-of-pack nutrition labelling, reducing portion size or focusing innovation efforts on the reduction of calories, sugar, salt and saturated fat. The advertising of HFSS food products to children is another area that is under scrutiny.



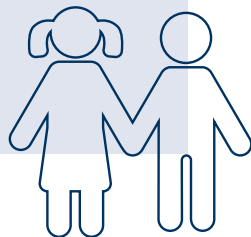
What is happening in France?

In France, advertisements for products containing added sugar, salt or artificial sweeteners must include health-related information, in a similar vein to health warnings on alcohol or tobacco products⁴. However, the country does not have a dedicated government roadmap for reducing obesity levels.

A governmental report published in 2019⁵ found that the policy to fight obesity in France was 'proactive but poorly coordinated' and recommended 'more restrictive regulation' of the food industry. The report highlighted the exposure of young children to adverts for HFSS products, saying 'attempts to increase marketing supervision of advertising targeted at children in the audio-visual and digital media have failed'.

The report also found that actions carried out within the framework of successive national programs (e.g. health related information on food advertising and a National Educational Program on Healthy Nutrition at School) 'suffered from insufficient coordination'. Additional taxation of products with low nutritional content was considered in the report, but details are not yet available.

We have a dedicated white paper looking at rules related to the advertising of HFSS food to children.



France's fourth government plan for nutrition, National Health Nutrition Program (PNNS) 4,⁶ was launched by Minister of Health Agnès Buzyn on 20 September 2020 for the 2019-2023 period. It aims to reduce overweight, obesity and undernutrition among the French population and to encourage physical activity, proposing to:

- Reduce ultra-processed foods in the diet by 20% by 2021
- Increase consumption of dried fruits and legumes
- Increase consumption of homemade food
- Reduce consumption of fruit juice and breakfast cereals

Last year, Public Health France recommended the prohibition of adverts for Nutri-Score D or E products at times when children and adolescents most watch TV⁷ (please see our white paper on front of pack nutrition labelling for more details). The authority also suggested a new system of health messages on advertisements, using banners to indicate Nutri-Score D or E classification. These recommendations have not yet been included in any draft law but pressure on the French Government is increasing.

The situation in Poland

Great importance is placed on obesity prevention in Poland. Together with mental health issues, it has been high on the agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2020, a draft Regulation of the Council of Ministers was published on the National Health Programme (Narodowy programme Zdrowia (NPZ) for 2021-2025)⁸. Its strategic objective is to increase life expectancy and reduce health inequalities.

The National Health Programme will employ various strategies including:

- Health as part of the national curriculum in schools
- Increasing subsidised places promoting sports activities
- Improvement of food labelling

Poland has already seen legislative rules aimed at improving nutritional choices following concerns about consumption of HFSS foods. In 2016, the Government published an ordinance setting rules on foodstuffs intended for sale to children and adolescents as well requirements for catering units in educational establishments. At the start of 2021 a 'sugar tax' came into force, affecting beverages with added sugar, sweeteners or active substances such as caffeine or taurine.

The sugar tax has fixed and variable elements. A fixed amount (PLN 0.5) is applicable to beverages with sugar content equal to or less than 5g per 100ml, or those including at least one sweetener. Beverages containing more than 5g of sugar per 100ml are subject to an additional fee of PLN 0.05 per gram.

The presence of caffeine or taurine in a beverage results in a separate fee of PLN 0.10 per litre. So, beverages containing sugar or sweeteners and caffeine or taurine have the fee calculated as the sum of the above accordingly.

Finally, beverages containing vegetable or fruit juices with not less than 20% of the raw material composition are only affected if they contain more than 5g of sugar in 100ml, and then only by the variable part of the fee. The same is true of carbohydrate and electrolyte solutions.



Approaches in the rest of Europe

The UK's stance

In July 2020, a new obesity strategy was unveiled by the UK Government, urging people to lose weight to beat COVID-19 and protect the NHS. A short consultation to totally restrict online advertising for HFSS foods stated:

...evidence shows that people who are overweight or living with obesity who contract COVID-19 are at greater risk of being seriously ill and dying from the virus. As excess weight is one of the few modifiable factors for COVID-19, government has been clear that there is an urgent need to help support people to achieve a healthier weight and do all that we can to improve the health of our nation to better equip us for the future.⁹

The outcome of this specific consultation is not yet available. However, the wider plan includes a raft of measures, such as banning TV and online advertisements for HFSS products before 9pm when they are more likely to be seen by children. It is expected that this will be implemented across both platforms by the end of 2022.

Additional steps include:

- Restricting the promotion of HFSS products via offers such as 'buy one get one free'
- Banning placement of HFSS products in prominent locations intended to encourage purchase, both online and in physical stores in England
- Publishing a 4-nation public consultation to gather views and evidence on the current 'traffic light' label to help people make healthy food choices
- Introducing legislation requiring large out-of-home food businesses (restaurants, cafes and takeaways) with more than 250 employees to add calorie labels to the food they sell
- Consulting on the intention to make companies provide calorie labelling on alcohol

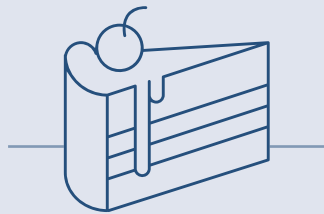
In some cases, food and beverage businesses may need to reformulate products to improve health credentials in order to continue advertising and promotion activities.

Sugar reduction programme

In 2016 the UK Government set out to reduce sugar content in certain foods by 20% by the end of 2020, with a 5% reduction in the first year of the programme. This ambitious plan was a world-first and required the cooperation of the food industry. It focused on ten food categories that had been identified as contributing the greatest sugar intake to children's diets. Achieving the target necessitated various measures, from reformulation to portion size reduction. Advertising was also used to help shift consumer purchasing habits by promoting lower sugar products.

The ten sugar reduction categories

- Breakfast cereals
- Cakes
- Biscuits
- Morning goods
- Yogurts
- Puddings
- Ice cream
- Sweet confectionary
- Chocolate confectionary
- Sweet spreads and sauces



Calorie reduction programme

An ongoing calorie reduction programme commissioned by Public Health England (PHE) takes a similar approach to those addressing salt and sugar intake¹⁰. A target calorie reduction of 20% has been set for certain products by 2024. Again, the food industry has a key role to play in the reformulation of products.

Food categories covered by the calorie reduction programme include sandwiches, crisps and savory snacks. This is partly due to their contribution to children's calorie intake, however this programme addresses the whole population.

Spotlight on Scotland

Food Standards Scotland launched a consultation in July 2020 seeking feedback from consumers, health professionals and the food and beverage industry as part of a UK-wide consultation on front of pack nutrition labelling (FOPNL)¹¹. The consultation aims to build on the success of the UK's 'traffic light' scheme, which helps consumers make more considered and healthy choices through easy comparison of different food products.

Switzerland

During the spring 2020 lockdown prompted by COVID-19, the Swiss Government commissioned an online survey to establish people's eating habits. The study¹², which involved 1,000 respondents, covered the consumption of certain foods, meal preparation and household supplies. Some questions also focused on physical activity and general health.

Overall, the findings indicated that more food had been consumed through lockdown, especially fruit and vegetables, homemade bread and snacks. During the reporting period there was also a trend towards a decrease in physical activity, especially amongst younger people.

As part of its obesity strategy the Swiss Government regularly issues voluntary recommendations for the food industry. These focus on healthy eating and supporting consumers to make healthy choices.



Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the importance of tackling obesity. Current governmental strategies range from the situational monitoring seen in Switzerland to stricter rules on the promotion, advertising and labelling of food. Some nations, such as the UK, are already ramping up obesity strategies in line with the fight against COVID-19, and we expect this trend to gather momentum.

Food and beverage businesses must be mindful of existing and potential requirements and restrictions in different markets. Ensuring product innovation is rooted in a firm understanding of measures to tackle obesity will play a central role in future success.

Key takeaways

1. A link between obesity and serious outcomes from COVID-19 has been established
2. Some governments are taking a firmer stance in the fight against obesity
3. Actions taken by authorities in different markets will have a direct impact on the food and beverage industry
4. Businesses need to monitor the situation closely, especially in relation to reduction plans which may require product reformulation



How can Leatherhead help?

Leatherhead Food Research supports food and beverage businesses by monitoring upcoming changes related to obesity. Our scientists and regulatory experts can implement strategies to ensure products meet legal requirements, from initial formulation to final presentation. We can also forecast the impact of government plans on the food industry over the medium to long term with our horizon scanning service.



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About Leatherhead Food Research ▾

Leatherhead Food Research provides expertise and support to the global food and drink sector with practical solutions that cover all stages of a product's life cycle from consumer insight, ingredient innovation and sensory testing to food safety consultancy and global regulatory advice. Leatherhead operates a membership programme which represents a who's who of the global food and drinks industry. Supporting all members and clients, large or small, Leatherhead provides consultancy and advice, as well as training, market news, published reports and bespoke projects. Alongside the member support and project work, our world-renowned experts deliver cutting-edge research in areas that drive long term commercial benefit for the food and drink industry. Leatherhead Food Research is a trading name of Leatherhead Research Ltd, a Science Group Company.

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