



Yes, we're fat, but what do we do about it?

Ban junk food ads? Weigh kids? **Dan Harrison** asks if the "solutions" to obesity actually work.

OBESITY experts agree: it's crunch time. But there is little consensus on how to tackle what is emerging as the world's most pressing medical crisis.

In just 20 years, calorie-dense fast food, passive entertainment and our dependence on the car have fuelled a doubling of Australian obesity rates. We now have the fifth-highest adult obesity rate in the world, with almost 9 million adults either overweight or obese. Their excess weight will place them at greater risk of diabetes, heart disease and a range of other conditions, and — according to a 2005 analysis by Access Economics — cost the nation more than \$21 billion a year in health-care costs and lost productivity.

But while there is agreement on the scale of the problem — globally more than 2 billion adults are either overweight or obese — opinion is divided on the best ways to overcome it.

"The solution is simple: less food, more exercise," says federal Labor MP Steve Georganas, who is chairing a parliamentary inquiry into obesity in Australia. "How do we get people to do those things? That's the hard part."

Tomorrow, the World Health Organisation will present its action plan on the prevention of chronic diseases to the World Health Assembly in Geneva.

The plan calls on WHO member states to introduce a range of measures to tackle obesity, from restrictions on junk food advertising to planning and transport policies that encourage walking and cycling.

The Sunday Age looks at five measures that may form part of

the solution.

Restricting junk food ads

The Canadian province of Quebec outlawed advertising to children through any medium in 1980. Childhood obesity rates actually increased after the bans were introduced, but supporters of the ban point to the fact that stations broadcasting from outside the province were not subject to the restrictions. Rates of obesity are lower among French-speaking children in Quebec than among English-speaking children from the province, who could watch American television. But obesity rates were not measured before the ban was introduced, so it is unclear if this is due to the ban or longstanding cultural differences.

A 2006 report commissioned by the Victorian Department of Human Services predicted that of 13 measures to combat obesity, restrictions on TV advertising of junk food to children would have the most impact, saving 37,000 disability-adjusted life years and \$300 million per year if implemented nationally.

But the authors admitted that while the link between advertising and unhealthy food choices was proven, the relationship between food choice and weight was based on less evidence. The authors also noted that such a ban was politically unpalatable.

The Howard government repeatedly brushed off calls to restrict junk-food advertising. Labor in opposition hinted at a ban on the use of toys to promote junk food before Kevin Rudd contradicted his then health spokeswoman by saying existing rules were adequate — a move

seen by some as a cave-in to the food and advertising lobby.

"Traffic light" food labelling

Nutritionist Rosemary Stanton is one of many people calling for a mandatory front-of-pack labelling scheme to inform consumers about the levels of fat, sugar and salt in food products. In Britain, the Food Standards Agency has already introduced a voluntary system that uses the traffic light colours to tell people whether a product has a high, medium or low level of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. Surveys found that more than 80% of people preferred traffic-light labelling to other initiatives.

The scheme also boosted sales of healthy products and prompted some manufacturers to reformulate their products to reduce the number of red lights they received.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council launched its own system based on recommended daily intake in 2006. It says traffic-light labelling is overly simplistic, but Dr Stanton says the council's scheme confuses customers.

"When you walk into the supermarket and there's 30,000 items, you cannot read all the labels so you need a label that tells you quickly, is this a product I should eat every day, or is it a product I should only eat occasionally," she says.

"We've got to make it easy for people (to make healthy choices) otherwise it's not going to happen, and the food industry is not going to make it easy because their profits depend upon it."



Raising tax on "junk" food

Currently, breakfast cereals are GST exempt but the Obesity Policy Coalition — a Melbourne-based group which advocates for government initiatives to combat obesity — wants the tax imposed on cereals comprising more than 27% sugar, such as Kellogg's Nutri-Grain, Coco-Pops, Rice Bubbles and Just Right. The OPC wants any tax hikes on junk food to be accompanied by subsidies to make fresh food cheaper. British research published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* has found that a carefully targeted tax on unhealthy foods could reduce heart disease.

In Europe in the 1980s, sales of full-cream milk dropped when changes to a subsidisation scheme caused its price to rise more than skim milk.

Norway is reportedly considering removing Value Added Tax on fresh fruit and vegetables and doubling it on soft drinks.

The recent 2020 summit discussed the idea of using taxes on junk food, tobacco and alcohol to fund a national preventive health agency. The Rudd Government will implement part of this with a plan to increase taxes on alcopops and channel the revenue into preventive health.

Bariatric surgery

Bariatric or lap-band surgery

involves the insertion of a silicone band around the stomach to reduce the patient's appetite.

A Victorian Department of Human Services study concluded it was a cost-effective option for people who were already severely obese. A study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2006, which received support from manufacturers of the medi-

cal devices used in the procedure, found patients who underwent bariatric surgery lost more weight than patients who tried to lose weight with lifestyle change, low-calorie diets or weight-loss drugs.

A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* earlier this year showed that lap-band surgery could lead to remission of type 2 diabetes.

Weighing

In the US state of Arkansas, schools weighed children and informed parents if their child was overweight. The program prompted a small drop in obesity, and similar measures have since been adopted in three other US states. But the governor who introduced the scheme, one-time Republican presidential aspirant Mike Huckabee, has since left office and his Democratic replacement has threatened to dismantle the program, citing fears for children's self-esteem.

Where we stand

Rate of obesity among adults

1. United States	32.2%
2. Mexico	30.2%
3. Britain	23%
4. Greece	21.9%
5. AUSTRALIA	21.7%
6. New Zealand	20.9%
7. Hungary	18.8%
8. Luxembourg	18.6%
9. Canada	18%
10. Czech Republic	17%

SOURCE: OECD

