

## Background

Unhealthy diet and excess body weight (or Body Mass Index) are key risk factors for many cancers<sup>1</sup>. These include oesophageal (food pipe), pancreatic, liver, bowel, kidney, endometrium (lining of the womb), and post-menopausal breast cancer. Addressing modifiable diet-related risk factors could reduce the risk of some cancers by up to six percent<sup>2</sup>.

However, for many people in Aotearoa-New Zealand, achieving a healthy diet and weight is not easy or equitable<sup>3</sup>. One third of children and two thirds of adults in Aotearoa are overweight or obese, ranking children second and adults third highest of all OECD countries for obesity<sup>4,5</sup>. Historical factors including colonisation, loss of food sovereignty and socioeconomic conditions including food insecurity are determinants of unhealthy diet and excess weight experienced disproportionately by Māori and Pacific people<sup>3,4,6-9</sup>. Unhealthy food environments that normalise and promote affordable ultra-processed food, often more so in poorer communities, also contribute to these inequities<sup>10-15</sup>.

Population rather than individually focused strategies that improve wider social determinants and food environments are recommended as the most cost effective way to equitably address preventable diet-related diseases such as cancer<sup>16,17</sup>. Reorienting food environments and systems would help achieve equitable access to culturally appropriate, environmentally sustainable and affordable healthy food. This would support the Crown's Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations to protect the health and wellbeing of Māori<sup>18</sup>. However, strategies and regulatory approaches recommended to address unhealthy food environments have gained little traction with governments over the past decades<sup>18</sup>. Government initiatives targeting diet-related diseases have been insufficient to lower rates or achieve equity in their outcomes<sup>20</sup>. While the commercial pressures invoked by the food industry on governments are well recognised, key policy interventions are urgently needed to significantly reduce food insecurity and the promotion, normalisation and availability of cheap ultra-processed food<sup>12,21</sup>. Raising public awareness of diet-cancer risks and their determinants is also needed and could help gain support for population level strategies to address diet and cancer risks<sup>22</sup>.

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1 Body Mass Index (BMI) is used as a screening tool for overweight or obesity. Weight that is considered higher than a healthy weight (BMI 18.5-25) for a given height is described as overweight (BMI 25-30) or obese (BMI >30).

2 Food security is 'the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, and the ability to obtain these in socially acceptable ways. Food insecurity exists when this access is limited, uncertain or compromised.

# Summary of recommendations

To protect and address health equity in Aotearoa, the Cancer Society advocates an evidence based population approach and a shift to sustainable healthy food patterns and systems<sup>16,23-25</sup>. Addressing the complexity of the issue will need many approaches. The Cancer Society supports collaboratively working on and advocating for

- raising public awareness of the links between diet, food environments and cancer risk
- strengthening the Childhood Obesity Plan including adoption of clear and consistent healthy food standards for education settings
- government set standards for the processed food industry including
  - a substantial health protecting levy on sugar sweetened drinks
- protecting children and young people from marketing of unhealthy food and drink
- government set targets for the reformulation of processed foods and
- mandatory front-of-pack Health Star Rating labelling for all processed food
- development of a national food and nutrition strategy including
  - reframing food and nutrition guidelines
  - protecting food systems valued by Māori
  - ways to address food insecurity.

## Recommendations

The Cancer Society supports stronger government leadership, regulation and resourcing to enable affordable sustainable healthy food for all New Zealanders to reduce diet-related cancer risk though:

1. Raising awareness of diet, food environments and cancer risk. While many adults in NZ are aware that there are things they can do to reduce risks of cancer, there remain substantial gaps in understanding. Improving public awareness with an equity focus is recommended as an important part of cancer control<sup>22,26</sup>. The Cancer Society has a key role in raising awareness of diet and cancer risks to increase public and political support for effective policies to address economic, social and environmental determinants of diet and weight. These include the following:
  2. Strengthening the Childhood Obesity Plan through specific, measurable objectives, targets, funding, evaluation, and policies. A comprehensive national plan to improve the food environments for children in Aotearoa is needed to fulfil legal obligations to the United Nations to provide good food for their health<sup>24,27</sup>. An important part of this plan is to make healthy affordable food easily available in schools, early childhood education centres, kura kaupapa, kohanga, iwi wananga, marae, churches and public settings<sup>25,28,29</sup>. Co-creation and implementation of healthy food policies may be needed.
3. Higher standards for the processed food industry. The New Zealand processed food industry is largely unregulated despite the known harm of ingredients such as sugar, salt and saturated fat to public health. The Cancer Society supports tighter government regulations of the processed food industry through the following approaches.
  - a. A substantial health protecting levy on sugar sweetened drinks to encourage industry reformulation and reducing consumption<sup>30-32</sup>. The Cancer Society endorses the adoption of a sugar sweetened drink levy in line with national and international recommendations including the New Zealand Dental Association's Consensus Statement, World Cancer Research Fund and WHO<sup>24,33-37</sup>. A

sugary drinks levy would help address the health costs associated with unhealthy food currently paid for by the tax-funded public health system<sup>32</sup>.

- b. Regulations to reduce the exposure and power of unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children and young people, especially Māori and Pacific people. This needs to address broadcast media, non-broadcast media (food packaging, sponsorship, digital marketing) and children's settings<sup>12</sup>. The current industry controlled, voluntary Children's and Young Peoples Advertising Code remains insufficient to protect children from unhealthy food advertising<sup>38,39</sup>. The Cancer Society recommends tighter government regulation and monitoring of food marketing to prioritise children's health over commercial interests. Use of WHO nutrient profiling models tailored to the New Zealand context is recommended to classify foods as eligible or not eligible to be marketed to children, along with mechanisms to replace unhealthy food sponsorship of sporting and cultural events with healthy advertising<sup>12,40,41</sup>.
- c. Government set targets to reduce the added salt, sugar and saturated fat content of New Zealand processed foods as a cost effective strategy to improve the nutritional quality of our food supply<sup>16,17,25</sup>.
- d. Strengthening and mandating the Health Star Rating front of pack nutrition labelling system to incentivise industry reformulation and clearly inform consumers about the healthfulness of packaged food<sup>42,43</sup>.

4. A National Food and Nutrition Strategy to clearly identify and address food systems that promote and normalise culturally appropriate, sustainable and affordable healthy food. This would optimise health, the environment and the economy<sup>44</sup>. To achieve this goal the Cancer Society supports the following.

- a. Reframing the Ministry of Health, Eating and Activity guidelines to address environmental sustainability alongside diet patterns and health<sup>44,45</sup>.
- b. Protecting waterways and coastal ecosystems to ensure plentiful wild food resources traditionally valued by Māori<sup>7</sup>.
- c. Upstream approaches to address food insecurity. While community initiatives can help in the short term, upstream issues such as rising food costs and benefit levels and minimum wage rates need to be addressed for long term solutions<sup>46-48</sup>. The 2019 Welfare Expert Advisory Group identified that current levels of benefits and low incomes do not meet peoples' basic needs and to access healthy food. The Cancer Society supports initiatives to address food insecurity such as living wages and benefit levels that ensure the whakamana tāngata or dignity of Maori and others<sup>49</sup>. This would help Aotearoa meet its obligations to the United Nations to protect, respect and fulfil people's rights to healthy food.

These policy priorities to impact diet-related cancer risk align with those set by other local and international organisations and public health experts<sup>16,28,50</sup>.

## The role of the NZ Cancer Society in nutrition-related cancer prevention

The Cancer Society considers it has an important role in advocating for these key strategies to enable all New Zealanders to access affordable healthy and environmentally sustainable food in order to reduce diet-related cancer risk.

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