

## PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND MULTIPLE CAUSES OF OBESITY MORE LIKELY TO SUPPORT GOVERNMENT ANTI-OBESITY POLICIES

People who believe being overweight is caused by the food environment or genes – both seen as outside individual control - are more likely to support a wide range of government policies to tackle the obesity epidemic, new research shows.

The study published in *Public Health Nutrition* recently (Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> July) concluded that improving awareness of the multiple causes of obesity could help the public to accept government action to reduce obesity.

Researchers at University College London (UCL) interviewed nearly 2,000 British adults and analysed their beliefs about the causes of obesity and their attitudes towards a range of government policies to prevent and treat obesity, including menu labelling and advertising restrictions.

Overall, most people believed obesity was caused by the food environment and lack of willpower, with nearly two thirds agreeing that *being overweight is mainly the person's own fault*. Less than half believed genes play a part in causing obesity, although this is now well-established in the scientific community.

People were most supportive of the government funding healthy lifestyle campaigns, but only a third thought *the government should increase taxes on the sale of unhealthy foods*.

However, people who recognised that the food environment is one cause of obesity were more likely to be supportive of all the policies described, including taxation, and those who recognised that genes play a part, were more likely to agree that *weight loss treatments should be offered free on the NHS*.

Study author Dr Rebecca Beeken from the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre at UCL said: "The Government's current plan to tackle obesity through 'nudging' people into making healthier choices has been widely criticised by the health community for being too 'soft' and underplaying the role of the food environment.

We know that the Government believes public support for a policy is an important indicator of how likely that policy is to succeed. This study shows that improving awareness of the multiple causes of obesity could help the public to accept tougher policy action to tackle the obesity problem we are currently facing in the UK."

Weight Concern, a UCL-based charity, is striving hard to engage the public on weight related issues, and educating the public about the causes of obesity is a key objective. Dr Laura McGowan, Executive Director of the charity said “We’ve witnessed huge advances in science which have helped us understand the complex causes of obesity, and we know that it isn’t just down to willpower. Our current environment means that it is easier to gain weight for a variety of reasons, and we also know that certain genes can mean it is harder for some people to manage their weight. It’s great that the public are beginning to recognise the role of the food environment, but we need to help combat the belief that it is mainly the person’s own fault, and increase awareness of the part that genes and many other factors play.

Dr McGowan went on to say “Contrary to popular belief, stigmatizing overweight individuals through blaming them for their excess weight is not helpful and there is evidence to suggest that this type of attitude may actually decrease people’s motivation to lose weight. This study suggests that improving awareness of the multiple causes of obesity may also increase public support for government anti-obesity policies. Weight Concern is working to better understand how we can change public beliefs about obesity”.

**ENDS**

For media enquiries please contact Weight Concern on 0207 679 1853 or email [enquiries@weightconcern.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@weightconcern.org.uk) .

### **Notes to Editors**

\*Beeken R J & Wardle J, Public beliefs about the causes of obesity and attitudes towards policy initiatives in Great Britain

Public Health Nutrition, 2013

<http://journals.cambridge.org/phn/ucl>

Data were collected from a representative sample of 1986 British adults (932 men, 1054 women) as part of a home-based, computer-assisted, face-to-face Omnibus survey of adults (aged >15 years) from across Great Britain in April 2012 carried out by a market research company (TNS).

We request that any images used in conjunction with articles arising from this press release do not portray obese individuals in a stigmatizing way, i.e. as headless (only from the shoulders down), from

unflattering angles (e.g. with only their abdomens or lower bodies shown), and/or engaging in stereotypical behaviours (e.g. eating unhealthy foods or engaging in sedentary behaviour). These images degrade and dehumanize obese individuals, while spreading false assumptions and oversimplifying the complex issue of obesity. Appropriate non-stigmatizing images for use by the press can be accessed here: [http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/media\\_gallery\\_intro.aspx](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/media_gallery_intro.aspx)

### **About UCL (University College London)**

Founded in 1826, UCL was the first English university established after Oxford and Cambridge, the first to admit students regardless of race, class, religion or gender, and the first to provide systematic teaching of law, architecture and medicine. UCL is among the world's top universities, as reflected by performance in a range of international rankings and tables. Alumni include Marie Stopes, Jonathan Dimbleby, Lord Woolf, Alexander Graham Bell, and members of the band Coldplay. UCL currently has over 13,000 undergraduate and 9,000 postgraduate students. Its annual income is over £700 million. [www.ucl.ac.uk](http://www.ucl.ac.uk)

### **About the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre**

The Health Behaviour Research Centre undertakes research aimed at advancing our understanding of behaviours that have a major impact on health and to contribute to the development of interventions to promote healthy lifestyles. The Centre is part of the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, UCL.

It receives core funding from Cancer Research UK and is staffed mainly by health and clinical psychologists. Additional funding is received from the Medical Research Council, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Department of Health, and the British Heart Foundation. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hbrc/>

### **About Weight Concern**

Weight Concern is a registered charity established in 1997 by a group of researchers and clinicians who recognised the necessity for an organisation addressing the needs of people who are overweight, and tackling the growing problem of obesity in the United Kingdom. Founded by Jane Wardle, Professor of Clinical Psychology at University College London, Weight Concern want to

support and empower people to live a healthy lifestyle and improve the understanding of health professionals and the public about the causes, consequences and treatments of overweight and obesity and to. It is dedicated to providing clear evidence-based information on obesity and weight management, and providing a 'voice' for those who have first-hand experience of weight problems.

Weight Concern is committed to helping people improve their health and sense of well-being by increasing access to successful treatments, researching and developing new approaches to combating obesity, and helping to find ways to prevent weight gain. Weight Concern is a certified member of the Information Standard and won the Best New Charity of the Year Award in 2002. Weight Concern is funded entirely through its activities in research, fundraising, training and education provision. [www.weightconcern.org.uk](http://www.weightconcern.org.uk)