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CANADA

STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

# Obesity in Canada

## Report Highlights

There is an obesity crisis in this country. Canadians are paying for it with their wallets — and with their lives.

But there is hope.

An extensive study conducted by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology charts a course to a leaner, healthier future.

Over the course of nearly two dozen meetings, the committee heard expert testimony from a range of Canadian and international stakeholders including individuals representing health and exercise professions, diet and health research sectors, food and beverage industries, Aboriginal groups, health charities, as well as the federal government.

The committee's findings show the vast scope of this epidemic:

- Each year 48,000 to 66,000 Canadians die from conditions linked to excess weight;
- Nearly two thirds of adults and one third of children are obese or overweight; and
- Obesity costs Canada between \$4.6 billion and \$7.1 billion annually in health care and lost productivity.

This report describes an innovative, whole-of-society approach to address this important issue — and urges bold but practical steps that can and must be taken to help Canadians achieve and maintain healthy weights.

### **Tipping the Scales Towards a Healthy Future**

Every Canadian is affected in some way by the obesity crisis.

The proliferation of fast and processed foods, coupled with the overwhelming use of electronic devices, have led to an environment where it is all too easy to eat poorly and remain inactive.

This is not the product of a collective loss of willpower — low-income Canadians, for example, often rely on unhealthy foods because these items are cheaper and sometimes all that is available.

Confusing nutritional labelling doesn't help: there are 56 different names for sugar alone and manufacturers do not have to group them together.

Canada's dated food guide is no longer effective in providing nutritional guidance to Canadians. Fruit juice, for instance, is presented as a healthy item when it is little more than a soft drink without the bubbles.

Canadians must renew their efforts to eat healthy and to get active — and government and industry must give citizens the means and motivation to make informed lifestyle choices.

From policy makers to parents, industry insiders to family doctors, all Canadians have a role to play to beat back this crisis.

### **Recommendations: A Call for A National Campaign to Combat Obesity**

This report urges the federal government to take aggressive measures to return Canadians to healthy weights. The report's 21 recommendations provide the tools to do so.

The government should:

- Consider a tax on sugar- and artificially-sweetened drinks;
- Implement effective tax levers to encourage healthy lifestyles; and
- Ban the advertising of food and beverages to children.

Other key recommendations would make it easier for Canadians to make informed decisions about their diet. The committee urges the government to:

- Standardize and expand nutritional information on food packaging to make it easier to understand;
- Increase awareness of the potential harms of processed foods and the benefits of fresh, whole foods;
- Overhaul Canada's dated food guide.

Many of the ways to fight obesity are beyond the federal government's direct control. In this report, the committee urges Health Canada to work with the provinces and territories on coordinated policy changes across the country. It recommends that Health Canada:

- Engage provinces and territories to improve doctors' training on diet and exercise and encourage doctors to give patients prescriptions for exercise;
- Help vulnerable populations to adopt healthier lifestyles; and
- Teach and practice active living in schools and promote it in the community.