

Preventing childhood overweight and obesity

Policy recommendations from
the Nordic Cancer Societies



The importance of preventing childhood overweight and obesity in the Nordic countries

Childhood overweight and obesity is increasing in the Nordic countries. These conditions often persist into adulthood and are associated with an increased risk of both health and wellbeing problems, including an increased risk of several cancer types.

Structural policies are paramount for improving health and addressing risk factors for cancer and other noncommunicable diseases. Therefore, the Nordic Cancer Societies put forward these five policy recommendations to help Nordic politicians and decision-makers take necessary actions to prevent a further increase of childhood overweight and obesity in their countries. These are evidence-based recommendations that draw on extensive knowledge and experience from several countries and organizations. They underline the crucial role of structural prevention policies for improving health, equity, and the built environment for Nordic children as well as the whole population.

The Nordic Cancer Societies call for immediate action from politicians and other relevant stakeholders to benefit both the present and future health and wellbeing of Nordic children, and to mitigate the negative societal and economic consequences associated with overweight and obesity.

By implementing effective prevention policies now, we can ensure healthier lives for the next generation and reduce the incidence of cancer cases in the future. A healthier future starts with the steps we take today.

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Policy recommendations

The Nordic Cancer Societies recommend that the Nordic governments implement:



Financial policies

Increase the affordability of healthier dietary options and ensure reduced sales, purchase, and consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages.



Marketing policies

Restrict the harmful and persuasive marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products to which children are exposed, by expanding currently insufficient media/marketing laws.



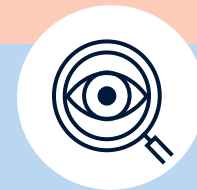
Labelling policies

Mandatory front-of-pack nutrition-labelling (FOPNL) on all prepackaged foods and beverages to create a food environment where the individual consumer can make informed choices.



School policies

Promote both healthy diets and physical activity among school children during the school day, and that ensure the surrounding built environment supports these actions.



Additional policies

Promote and improve the availability, accessibility, and affordability of healthy diets and physical activity in all public institutions and at all stages of childhood.

Recommendation

Fiscal policies

Nordic governments should implement fiscal policies that increase the affordability of healthier dietary options and ensure reduced sales, purchase, and consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages.

Fiscal policies – like taxation and subsidies – are one of the most efficient and cost-effective policy actions that contribute to the prevention of overweight and obesity among children. The regulation of food and beverage prices is well known for its positive health-behaviour promoting effects. Such policies can modify health behaviours such as purchases and consumption among both children, their families, and the whole population.

Evidence shows that taxes on unhealthy foods and beverages increase retail prices, hence reducing sales, purchases, and consumption of such products. A positive side-effect of taxes is the reformulation of products by the industry, which in some cases results in an improved nutritional quality of the taxed products.

Most of the available evidence regarding fiscal policies covers taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). A high consumption of SSBs is associated with an increased risk of overweight and obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other metabolic conditions. However, a much broader range of unhealthy products (e.g., confectionery, crisps and snacks, etc.) also contributes to such conditions. Therefore, it is important to use a government-led nutrient profile to guide the definition of unhealthy product categories for taxation.

Evidence further shows that subsidies on healthy foods and beverages reduce retail prices, increasing sales, purchases, and resulting in a higher consumption of those products. Moreover, evidence shows that implementing taxes and subsidies together leads to the greatest health and social benefits among children, and whole populations, including low-income groups.



For fiscal policies to be most effective, the Nordic governments must:

- Implement taxes on unhealthy foods and beverages¹.
- Use a government-led nutrient profile to determine which products to tax.
- Impose specific excise taxes on manufacturers and importers of these products.
- Consider tiered taxes to encourage industry reformulation and reductions of product sizes.
- Make sure tax rate is high enough to ensure reduced sales, purchase, and consumption of these types of products.
- Subsidise healthier food options, e.g., fruit and vegetables, to ensure they are affordable for all.
- Combine taxes and subsidies for greater health-behaviour impact.
- Earmark the revenue from taxes for health and social purposes to gain public support.

Recommendation

Marketing policies

Nordic governments should implement mandatory policies to restrict the harmful and persuasive marketing of unhealthy food and beverage products to which children are exposed, by expanding currently insufficient media/marketing laws.

A comprehensive body of evidence shows that the marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages affects children negatively on various health-behaviour parameters. Children are much more vulnerable to this type of marketing than adults, and evidence clearly shows that existing voluntary industry codices do not protect children adequately. Instead, mandatory marketing restrictions have much greater impact on health behaviour at industry level. Marketing restrictions are cost-effective tools that contribute to preventing childhood overweight and obesity.

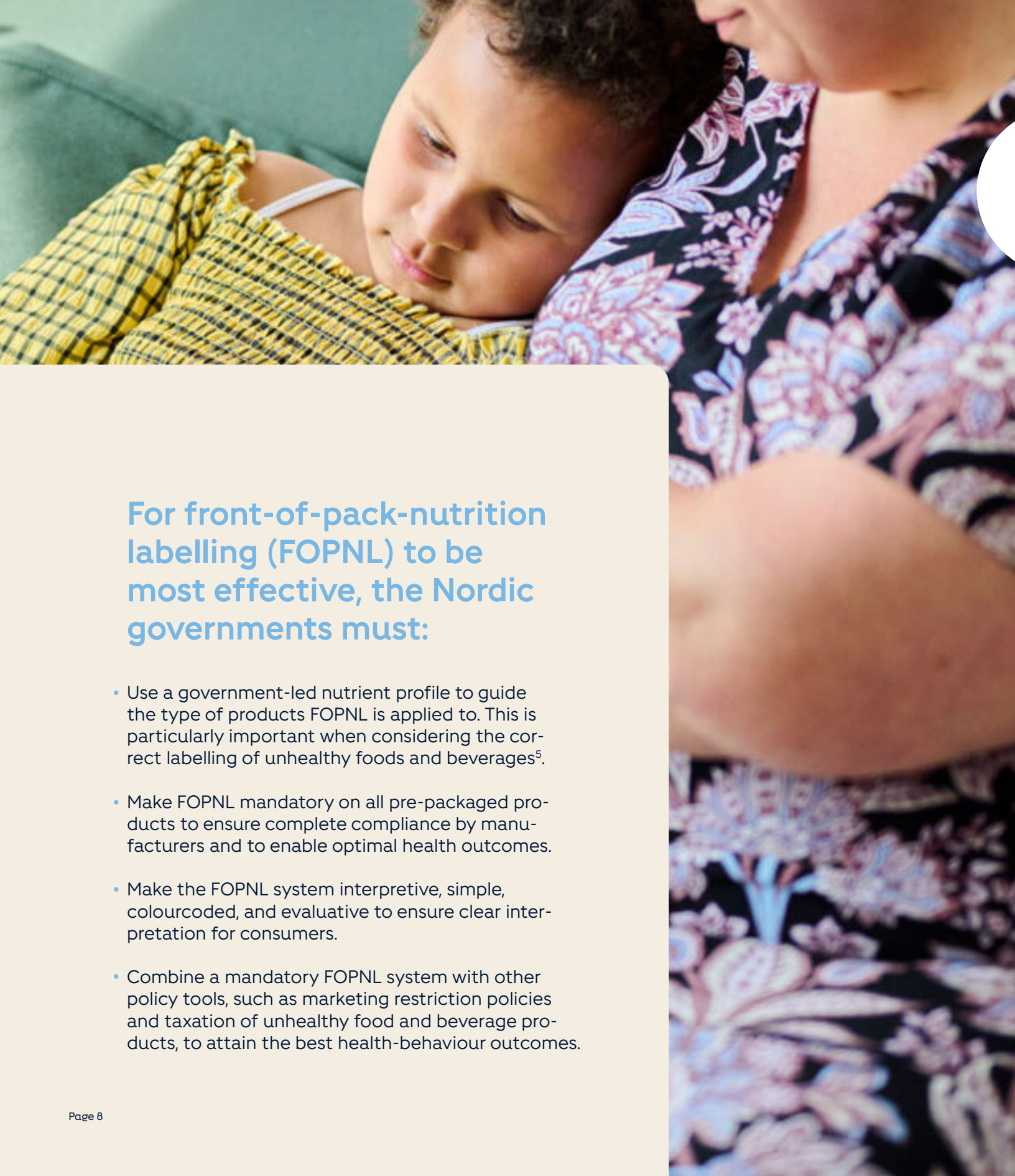
Marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages affects children's intake, food choices, and preference for unhealthy foods and beverages. This negative effect is seen across a broad range of marketing channels such as TV, movie commercials, the internet, social media advertisement, and advergames.

Children's media use has increasingly moved from classic media platforms and linear TV to social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Reddit, YouTube, and streaming services. Children are particularly vulnerable to different marketing techniques such as the use of cartoons, celebrities, influencers, or popular media characters, all of which influence their preferences for and intake of unhealthy products.



For marketing restriction policies to be most effective, the Nordic governments must:

- Implement mandatory marketing restriction policies.
- Protect all children up to 18 years of age.
- Cover all types of marketing techniques², channels³, and platforms.
- Cover marketing that children are exposed to and not only marketing that is directly targeted at children.
- Use a government-led nutrient profile to define unhealthy foods and beverages⁴.
- Secure proper implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of legislation.
- Draw support from the legal framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.



Recommendation

Labelling policies

Nordic governments should implement mandatory front-of-pack nutrition-labelling (FOPNL) on all prepackaged foods and beverages to create a food environment where the individual consumer can make informed choices.

Front-of-pack nutrition-labelling (FOPNL) is a cost-effective tool that helps both children, their families, and the broad population to make informed, healthier food and beverage choices. Evidence shows that FOPNL increases awareness and understanding of the nutritional content in products. Evidence further shows that FOPNL is the most easily interpreted label type across all socioeconomic groups.

Evidence shows that mandatory front-of-pack nutrition-labelling (FOPNL) ensures higher compliance by the industry and creates opportunities for the industry to reformulate the nutritional content of a product into a healthier composition.

Evidence further suggests that FOPNL is most effective when implemented along with other policy tools. The implementation of a broad range of policy tools will ensure that consumers can make informed food choices and will further contribute to improving the surrounding built environment.

For front-of-pack-nutrition labelling (FOPNL) to be most effective, the Nordic governments must:

- Use a government-led nutrient profile to guide the type of products FOPNL is applied to. This is particularly important when considering the correct labelling of unhealthy foods and beverages⁵.
- Make FOPNL mandatory on all pre-packaged products to ensure complete compliance by manufacturers and to enable optimal health outcomes.
- Make the FOPNL system interpretive, simple, colourcoded, and evaluative to ensure clear interpretation for consumers.
- Combine a mandatory FOPNL system with other policy tools, such as marketing restriction policies and taxation of unhealthy food and beverage products, to attain the best health-behaviour outcomes.

Recommendation

School policies

Nordic governments should implement policies that both promote healthy diets and physical activity among school children during the school day, and that ensure the surrounding built environment supports this.

Schools are a central arena in children's lives and a place where they spend a substantial amount of time during important formative years. Evidence shows that health policies within and around schools can both improve children's diet and increase their physical activity levels. Furthermore, professionals in schools (e.g., school nurses and teachers) are in a unique position to provide support and improve children's opportunities for healthy lives. Thus, schools are distinctive settings for implementing policies to prevent overweight and obesity among children.

School policies such as introducing fruit and vegetable programs, nutrition standards, and increasing the availability and reducing the prices of healthy foods and beverages can improve school children's diets. Likewise, school policies like mandatory physical education, school environments that promote active travel, and increased physical activity and movement during the school day can increase physical activity levels.

Evidence shows that multifaceted school policies that focus on improving both diet and physical activity yield the greatest health benefits. Additionally, school policies can also contribute to improving the environmental and built surroundings, as well as equalizing current and future socioeconomic and educational inequalities.

For school policies to be most effective, the Nordic governments must:



Promote a healthy diet by:

- Offering free fruit and vegetables every school day.
- Offering free healthy school meals to all school children.
- Setting nutrition standards for foods and beverages offered in schools.
- Restricting marketing and sales of unhealthy foods and beverages⁶ within and near schools.

Promote physical activity by:

- Legislating minimum requirements for moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during every school day⁷.
- Promoting active transport (e.g., walking, bicycling) to and from schools with the help of adequate infrastructure.
- Changing the built school environment to facilitate and encourage movement, play, and physical activity.
- Restricting marketing and sales of unhealthy foods and beverages within and near schools.

Ensure nutrition and physical activity education is included in the curriculum, to increase health literacy.



Recommendation

Additional policies



Nordic governments should implement additional prevention policies that promote and improve the availability, accessibility, and affordability of healthy diets and physical activity in all public institutions and at all stages of childhood.

The prevention of childhood overweight and obesity is affected by a broad range of factors, including the food environment, the built environment, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, age, and the health status of parents. Additional prevention policies that focus on improving the overall opportunities for children's health in all public institutions and at all stages of childhood are therefore needed. Structural conditions and prevention policies influence the availability, accessibility, and affordability of healthy diets and physical activity for children and the population as a whole.

The food environment can be improved through prevention policies like standards for and an increase of the availability, accessibility, and affordability of healthy foods in public institutions. Furthermore, restricting unhealthy foods and beverages can reduce unhealthy dietary choices. Prevention policies in the built environment can increase movement, physical activity, play, and active travel among whole populations.

Before school age, early childhood is a critical period to prevent overweight and obesity in both childhood and later adulthood. Specifically, implementing and maintaining policies that improve and support breastfeeding and healthy dietary and physical activity habits among parents have a preventive effect.

For additional policies to be most effective, the Nordic governments must:

Ensure a healthy diet in all public by:

- Increasing the availability, accessibility and affordability of healthy foods and beverages⁸.
- Restricting the availability, accessibility, and affordability of unhealthy foods and beverages^{9,10}.
- Enhancing public standards for what is offered in public institutions¹¹.
- Restricting price promotions and multi-buy offers on unhealthy foods and beverages¹².

Ensure opportunities for physical activity in all public areas by:

- Enhancing active transport infrastructure to promote walking and cycling.
- Improving access to and affordability of public transport options for families with children.
- Improving the built environment and access and affordability to indoor and outdoor physical activity facilities and organized sports.

Support families in all stages of childhood by:

- Promoting breastfeeding in early childhood.
- Restricting the marketing of breast-milk substitutes.
- Supporting healthcare professionals in assisting families before, during, and after birth.

For more information



Read more about the evidence

An umbrella review of the evidence on structural prevention policies and prevention of overweight and obesity among children - Nordic Cancer Union's project: Common actions for the prevention of overweight and obesity among children (NCU-CAPOC).



See the Nordic population's support

A study on public support for childhood overweight and obesity prevention policies in 5 Nordic countries.

Call to action for the Nordic politicians

- Define children as all individuals under 18 years of age.
- Keep up with the evidence on the health risks of specific nutrients and food products.
- Use a government-led definition for unhealthy foods and beverages as all nutrient-poor and/or energy-dense food and beverage products. These include, e.g., sugar-sweetened beverages, beverages with artificial sweeteners, salty/high-fat crisps, confectionary, and desserts.
- Establish monitoring systems for existing prevention policies.
- Implement all recommended policy tools for the greatest impact.
- Use a multifaceted approach to the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity.

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Footnotes

1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12) Unhealthy foods and beverages must be defined as nutrient-poor and/or energy-dense foods and beverages. These include, e.g., sugar-sweetened beverages, beverages with artificial sweeteners, salty/high-fat crisps, confectionary, desserts, etc. See more on page 8, 'Call to action for the Nordic politicians'.

2) Techniques reflect the power of marketing, e.g., the use of cartoons, celebrities, influencers, brand mascots, brand marketing, packaging, product placement, and other techniques that children are vulnerable to.

3) Marketing restrictions should include a wide range of media channels where marketing exists. This covers both physical and digital levels such as TV, movies, advertisements, billboards, outdoor marketing, social media, and advergames.

7) Minimum requirements should consider both physical education classes, active learning, and active play.

8) This may be achieved by, e.g., placing healthy foods and beverages at prominent places in public institutions or retail stores, lowering the prices of fruit and vegetables offered in sports halls, and increasing the selection of healthy foods in public institutions.

10) This may be achieved by, e.g., restricting unhealthy foods at prominent places in public institutions and retail stores, banning soft drink and confectionary machines in sports halls, and increasing the prices of unhealthy foods and beverages.

11) This may be achieved by, e.g., enhancing national standards for what foods and beverages are offered in public institutions, and by limiting the portion sizes of unhealthy foods and beverages offered, according to national guidelines.

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