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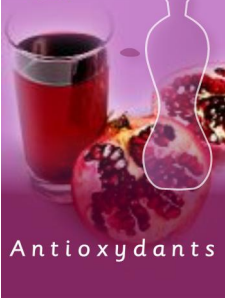
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Chasing down obesity

09/05/2006 - **It is time to admit that society is fighting a part-time battle against the bulge, willingly lambasting soft drinks, burgers and chocolate, while shuffling silently away from a fairly dismal exercise rate.**

The debate on rising [obesity](#) rates has become lopsided.

Societies in several western countries have spent much time and money chasing the latest fad diets or cajoling food firms to reformulate and get unhealthy products out of schools. Last week's deal to get high-calorie [soft drinks](#) out of US schools was only the latest in a long line.

Yet, figures suggest those same societies have failed to show comparable concern for their general lack of fitness.

Take Britain as a test case.

Less than half of the British population does enough exercise to meet the government's recommended 150 minutes per week, according to Deloitte's 'Health of the Nation' report, published at the end of March.

The figures reveal the dark truth lurking behind today's 'Playstation generation', which increasingly measures physical exertion in feet rather than miles.

Health professionals have repeatedly cited the importance of exercise alongside a balanced diet in order to maintain a 'healthy' weight, and reduce risk of several diseases.

Deloitte's recent report, however, said many people simply lacked the motivation to exercise; hardly the vigorous approach we are used to when watching people chase the latest fashionable health food or campaign against substandard school dinners.

This attitude, Deloitte added, was seriously hampering Britain's already depleted health service.

Obesity-related illnesses, which are inevitably linked to a lack of exercise, ate up £1.6bn of UK health service money last year, according to the government's own figures.

The problem has prompted the government to set ambitious targets - including to get 70 per cent of people up to their 150 minutes per week of exercise by 2020. But, policy on the ground has appeared consistently hypocritical.

This has been particularly apparent in relation to British children, of whom more than one in ten are now obese.

Children in British state schools are only required to complete two hours of physical education per week, and this has been cut back to one hour on certain occasions where more classroom time is needed.

One senior secondary school teacher told this publication that many UK schools also still lacked the space, facilities and equipment to implement a proper physical education programme.

There is a marked disparity between this situation and the urgency of the government's stated policy to kick [junk food](#) out of schools and have only juice, water and milk drinks sold in secondary school vending machines.

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Outside of the school, the government's rhetoric on providing more green spaces recently came under fire from its own watchdog body, the National Audit Office (NAO).

The correlation between green space and exercise is strong in the UK. Deloitte said the average Briton spent only £7.46 on exercise every month, with walking and jogging in free, public spaces the most common pursuits.

"Despite the higher profile of green space, many urban local authorities have not yet reflected this importance in well conceived and well supported local strategies," said the NAO in a report this March, adding that park managers said green space was shrinking in 16 per cent of Britain's urban areas.

The government, meanwhile, is expected to launch a 'delivery plan' this month to at least cut child obesity in the UK.

Almost 14 per cent of Britain's children were obese in 2003, compared to 9.6 per cent in 1995, and doctors have warned half of the countries kids could be obese by 2020. Health authorities aim to halt the rise of obesity in kids under 11 years of age by 2010.

The NAO has already told the government it will probably miss that target.

More like it will continue to be missed unless more members of the public and the government begin treating obesity as the lifestyle problem it really is. Taking soft drinks out of schools is good, just as the Mediterranean diet may reduce some health risks, but there is no room for armchair activists in this battle.

Chris Mercer is editor on BeverageDaily.com and DairyReporter.com. He has also worked as a freelance writer and researcher for BBC and Sunday Telegraph. Send any comments to chris.mercer@decisionnews.com.

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