

UK to spearhead Europe-wide initiative to reduce sugar and calorie intake in food

- Over 50 countries encouraged to sign up to network, set to launch in spring 2022
- Network will address rising rates of global obesity by cutting sugar and calories in food and drink products

The UK has been chosen by the World Health Organization (WHO) to lead a new Sugar and Calorie Reduction Network to take global action on sugar and calorie reduction.

Speaking at the WHO Regional Committee for Europe today (Monday 13 September), the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty announced the formation of the network, which will work with countries across Europe to reduce sugar and calorie intake. The WHO's EU region covers around 50 countries, with a much wider reach than the European Commission's remit.

The UK has agreed to use its world-leading expertise in domestic sugar and calorie reduction to support its European neighbours. Work will take place with the food and drink industry to make their products healthier by reducing sugar content in products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS), helping to tackle global rates of obesity.

In a global market where food is increasingly supplied by the same international companies, collective action on reducing sugar and calories will galvanise the food industry to take greater and faster action. The network's member states will share learning and technical expertise to encourage manufacturers to reformulate products by cutting the amount of sugar, and therefore calories, in food and drinks to ensure they are healthier.

The network will support the UK government's key existing commitments to the sugar and calorie reduction programmes and to take tackling obesity onto the global stage as part of its Tackling Obesity strategy, published last year. These programmes challenge the food industry across the UK to reduce the sugar and calorie in foods most commonly consumed by children. The UK has seen good progress with its sugar reduction programme – with sugar reduced by 13% in breakfast cereals, yogurts and fromage frais.

The Department of Health and Social Care's new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities – launching on October 1st – will lead national efforts to improve and level up the health of the nation by tackling obesity, helping improve mental health and promoting physical activity.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Sajid Javid said:

It's a testament to the success of our pioneering work in the UK to help people eat more healthily that we have been chosen to lead this programme.

We will work closely with our European partners to challenge the food industry to reduce sugar and calories in its products – reducing obesity, relieving pressure on health services and increasing our resilience to COVID-19 and any future pandemics.

Today's announcement puts into action the UK's 'Global Britain' ambitions, with the UK working with member states to drive forward collective action to influence both Europe and the world in tackling obesity.

Evidence suggests that people living with obesity are at greater risk of being seriously ill and dying from COVID-19. By taking action to reduce sugar and calories in food and drink, the network will not only address rising rates of global obesity, but increase global resilience both to COVID-19 and future pandemics.

Public Health Minister, Jo Churchill said:

Obesity is a global problem and we need to take urgent action to help people live healthier lives. This starts with the food and drink we consume and reducing the elements that are bad for our health.

Following strong action through our healthy weight strategy, I am delighted the UK will lead this international network to reformulate products and promote healthier food choices for people across Europe.

The WHO Sugar and Calorie Reduction Network will launch in spring 2022 and the WHO EU will be reaching out to member states inviting them to join. The WHO EU region covers around 50 countries, meaning that it extends beyond the European Commission's framework for action and would have a much wider reach.