

# Tackling Childhood Obesity

## About safefood

**safefood** is an all-island implementation body set up under the British-Irish Agreement. Our general remit is to promote awareness and knowledge of food safety and nutrition issues on the island of Ireland.

Our activities include research and promotion of food safety issues; communication of nutritional advice; promoting scientific co-operation and laboratory linkages; and providing independent scientific advice.

## Our key recommendations:

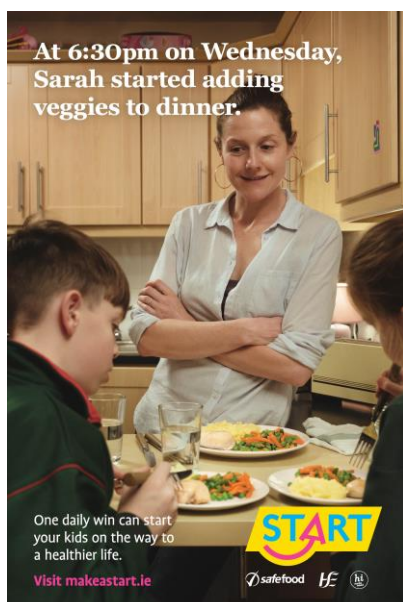
- A dedicated percentage of the overall obesity budget is required for obesity prevention to ensure a balance between prevention and treatment measures.
- Focus on those most in need by addressing inequalities.
- Establish a 70/30 ratio for Healthy Eating/Physical Activity initiatives in preventative measures. This is in line with evidence showing the relative contributions of food (70%) and physical activity (30%) to obesity
- Support parents using a parenting approach; a family-centred approach requires parenting skills as well as knowledge on healthy eating and physical activity.
- Implement more community cooking programmes such as 'Cook It' across the country to engage people with healthy eating and foods skills at a local community level
- Make Home Economics mandatory in post primary schools up to the end of Junior Cycle to develop basic food knowledge & skills from a young age

- Make measuring children's weight and height routine in schools. It is well established that parents don't recognise excess weight in themselves or their children. Normalising the measurement of body weight status will help overcome this barrier to behaviour change.
- Ensure all public awareness and behaviour-change campaigns use a citizen-centred, social marketing approach where the needs of the target audience are paramount to ensure health messages resonate with the relevant audience.
- Reframe the conversation around obesity to avoid stigmatisation and promote positive action.
- Continue to integrate prevention via the public's contact with front-line health professionals for example 'Every Contact Counts'.
- Optimise all activity via a partnership approach.

### Overview of our work in childhood obesity

**safefood** have been actively supporting the implementation of obesity policies on the island of Ireland since 2005. Our work is reflected in ongoing communications and awareness campaigns, scientific research, North/South partnerships & cooperation as well as specific settings including schools, communities and supports for healthcare professionals.

#### Behaviour change campaigns



The 5 year **START** campaign was launched by **safefood**, Healthy Ireland and the HSE in October 2017. This is a population-wide campaign aimed at supporting parents in making small daily wins to their family's eating, physical activity and sleep habits and to help start families on the way to a healthier life and prevent childhood obesity. The campaign will bring a consistent, practical approach with clear messages across all relevant sectors, for example in crèches, schools, GP surgeries and hospitals.

### Communities

To promote healthy eating, **safefood** have supported communities since 2009 through a 3-yearly programme of Community Food Initiatives (CFI). By end of 2018, 30 communities across the island of Ireland will have participated in a CFI. These projects engage their local communities in healthy eating and food skills and support families with children. The initiatives also share their learnings as part of the programme.

### Educational sector

**safefood** have developed a range of practical resources for the education sector, ranging from early childhood care through to primary, post primary and Early School leavers. These resources include both printed classroom resources and online teaching & learning supports. In addition, we facilitated and supported the development of nutritional standards for the DEIS School Meal Scheme by translating the learnings from the development and implementation of standards undertaken in Northern Ireland.

### Research

As part of our research programme, **safefood** have identified and addressed gaps in obesity-related evidence. Two key projects have helped inform policy in this area: '*The lifetime cost of childhood obesity*', and '*The cost of overweight and obesity on the island of Ireland*'. Other research has focused on key areas of behaviour change such as Portion Sizes; and The Cost of a Healthy Food Basket for low-income households.

### North/South partnership

Established in 2008, **safefood** facilitates the All-island Obesity Action Forum which brings together 31 stakeholders from the areas of food and physical activity to identify and promote co-operation in common areas of action and knowledge exchange.

Similarly, the All-island Food Poverty Network ensures a co-ordinated and strategic approach to tackling food poverty on the island through partnership and shared learnings. Households with children are at increased risk of experiencing food poverty which is associated with an increased risk of obesity.

### Healthcare professionals

**safefood** has partnered with the Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP) to develop an online training module for professionals in primary care on childhood obesity. As part of our new START campaign, dedicated resources for health professionals are also being developed.

### **Further details on relevant *safefood* activities**

#### **Behaviour Change Campaigns**

##### **START – A healthy weight for children campaign**

As one of the actions of the *Healthy Weight for Ireland 2016 – 2025* strategy, **safefood** in partnership with the Department of Health, Healthy Ireland and Health Service Executive have been engaged in developing a new 5 year public awareness campaign.

Developed using a 'co-creation' approach which involved working in particular with parents, and key stakeholders, the START campaign was created to be relevant, realistic and could achieve results. A recurring theme from discussions with parents was that life is busy and they have a lot going on. The campaign aims to support parents and make them feel proud of their efforts. It's not about being perfect, but about starting to make small changes and getting that 'daily win' in what families eat and how active they are.

The START campaign uses a parenting approach that encourages role-modelling and consistency. It offers families a number of key messages and practical, achievable tips to kick-start healthier family lifestyle changes. The campaign messages are:

- Make water and milk children's routine drinks – limit sugary drinks
- Minimise intake of foods high in fat, salt and sugar
- Give children child-sized portion sizes
- Increase healthier food choices – more fruit, vegetables and salad
- Increase physical activity levels
- Limit screen-time
- Get enough sleep

[www.makeastart.ie](http://www.makeastart.ie)

### Supporting Communities - tackling food poverty in the community



It is estimated that between 10% and 15% of the population are affected by food poverty with the health impacts ranging from malnutrition to overweight. Research has shown those living on a low income and single-parent families are at increased risk.

The Community Food Initiative (CFI) programme funded by **safefood** aims to address diet-related inequalities and overcome some of the problems faced by communities in eating healthy, affordable food. During the period 2010-2015, 17 projects were funded. The current CFI programme runs from 2016-2018 and focuses on supporting community food programmes across 13 health regions in Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with the aim of promoting food skills, planning, budgeting and cooking in low income areas. There is a strong emphasis on shared learning and networking between the selected projects. The lessons learned from the programme contribute to informing and supporting policy initiatives in relation to food poverty in the community on the island of Ireland.

During 2013-2015 the CFIs collectively resulted in:

- 9,381 individual attendances at one-off events such e.g. food taster sessions or single workshops
- 7,635 participated in healthy eating events and in gardening pursuits
- 4,940 participated in cooking skills events
- Reported outcomes included increased interest in food and its health effects; more experimenting with new foods and substitution of healthier foods; and enjoyment of growing produce.

### Supporting North/South partnership on obesity

Established in 2008, **safefood** facilitates the All-island Obesity Action Forum which brings together 31 stakeholders from the areas of food and physical activity to identify and promote co-operation in common areas of action and knowledge exchange and to support the implementation of obesity policies in both Northern Ireland (NI) and Republic of Ireland (ROI).

Two all-island meetings for members are held each year which also coincide with open workshops. The most recent workshop was held in Dublin in November 2017 and was attended by 130 delegates. The workshop focused on school as a setting for promoting a healthy lifestyle in children. A monthly eNewsletter to support the work of the forum was launched in April 2009 and currently has over 600 subscribers.

### All-island Food Poverty Network



Food Poverty is associated with low income and a less healthy diet because of issues of self-efficacy, awareness, food costs and skills such as cooking. People who eat less healthy diets have poorer health outcomes and are at increased risk of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and cancer.

In 2009, **safefood** established a network in partnership with the Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland which involves representatives from Government departments and Agencies, academia and NGOs with the aim of ensuring a co-ordinated and strategic approach to tackling food poverty on the island of Ireland. The group works by developing consensus on related issues, collaborating and sharing learning. Key achievements to date include:

- Development of a food poverty measure for Republic of Ireland (ROI) and an Northern Ireland (NI) pilot of food poverty indicator
- Report on research into Food Basket costs in ROI (2014) and NI (2016)
- Food Poverty conferences in ROI (2014) and NI (2015 – 2017)
- Three all-island network meetings held annually.
- Development and publication of a bi-annual all-island Food Poverty e-newsletter.

### Education - Pre-school

“Little Bites” has been developed as an online, one-stop-shop for all early childcare providers



and is a partnership between **safefood** and Early Childhood Ireland. The website is an information and resources hub which provides credible, independent and relevant information to childcare providers on a range of topics including healthy eating, food hygiene, allergens, training and educational support. Since Sep 2017, the site

has received over 8,000 page views.



## Primary school



**MediaWise** - The World Health Organisation (WHO) has stated that “*there is unequivocal evidence that childhood obesity is influenced by marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages high in saturated fat, salt and/or free sugars (HFSS).*” The WHO core recommendation on ending childhood obesity is to reduce children’s exposure to all such marketing.

**MediaWise** is a free online teaching resource developed by **safefood** which equips primary schoolchildren with the life skills they need to both enjoy and navigate the rapidly-changing media forms at their disposal. Developed with the input of teachers and an expert panel drawn from education, advertising, media and regulation, the eight-week programme is suitable from Junior infants right through to Sixth class. Since launch in 2017, over 300 schools have registered for the resource which has approx. 100 teachers using per day. More than 950 schools have requested hard copies of **MediaWise** and an Irish language version is also currently in development.



### Healthy Lunchboxes

Practical tips for you and your children on how to prepare a healthy lunchbox

### Healthy lunchbox leaflet

This free leaflet developed in partnership with Healthy Ireland and the HSE contains practical tips for parents on how to prepare a healthy lunch for school-aged children and includes a five-day lunchbox planner. To date, more than 136,000 leaflets have been distributed to 1,300 primary schools.

## Nutritional standards for funded school meals

In 2017, the Health and Wellbeing Unit, Department of Health **safefood** and the Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) programme in the Health Service Executive developed Nutrition Standards for funded School Meals. These standards aim to ensure that children and young people in schools participating in the scheme are provided with healthy, balanced meals that follow the Healthy Eating Guidelines. **safefood** contributed to the development of these standards by sharing the learnings from NI where standards have been in place for the last ten years.

## Secondary School



**What's on a label?** is a free teaching resource developed from recommendations of an expert working group established by the Minister for Agriculture & Food in 2002. At the time of launch **safefood** found that 71% of people in Ireland only

read labels occasionally while 42% were not satisfied with the information contained on food labels. **safefood** worked with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, The Irish Nutrition and Dietetics Institute (INDI) and teachers to develop the resource to educate young people on how to read food labels to create a positive influence on the choices they make regarding their food as they grow into adulthood. The resource forms an important component of the Social, Personal, Health Education (SPHE) curriculum at Junior cycle level.



**Early School Leavers** - With up to 1 in 5 teenagers leaving school early, this can have a negative impact on their longer-term health, as learning about food is a lifelong skill that early school leavers can often lack. **safefood** in partnership with the Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland developed "Eatright", the first all-island website providing materials, activities, and education content specifically for trainers and teachers working directly with early schools leavers. Developed with the target audience and their trainers, [www.eatright.eu](http://www.eatright.eu) was launched in 2014 and over 15,000 teenagers have used it since launch, with an average of 25-40 users during weekdays.

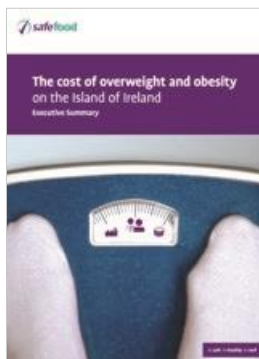


**Fuel your Body** is a free information booklet developed in partnership with the INDI which provides practical healthy eating and nutrition advice for 13- to 17-year-olds who are involved in sport.



## Research

### Informing public health policy: *The Economic Cost of Obesity*



The economic cost of obesity (both direct healthcare costs and indirect costs such as reduced or lost productivity) caused by the numerous health conditions associated with excess weight have never been fully estimated for the island of Ireland.

**safefood** commissioned a comprehensive research project led by University College Cork to determine a reliable estimate of this economic cost. This will help policy makers and healthcare providers North and South to develop and implement

appropriate health and social policies in this area and in the allocation of resources. Findings estimated the annual economic cost of overweight and obesity to be €1.64 billion (€1.13 billion Republic of Ireland; €510 million Northern Ireland). The study found that in the Republic of Ireland, 35% of total costs (€398 million) represented direct healthcare costs i.e. hospital in-patient; out-patient; GP and drug costs. However, two thirds (65%) of the economic costs were indirect costs in reduced or lost productivity and absenteeism and amounted to €728 million.

Costs	Republic of Ireland (€)	Northern Ireland (€)	Northern Ireland* (£)
Direct Costs	€398,615,581	€127,406,641	£92,323,652
Indirect Costs	€728,968,662	€382,917,113	£277,476,168
Total Costs	€1,127,584,243	€510,323,754	£369,799,820

\*2009 £ Stg to Euro Purchasing Power Parity

This research now provides a reliable, up to date and relevant estimate for the cost to the island's economy as a result of weight-related ill health in Ireland. While it is acknowledged that these are conservative figures and don't reflect the human and social costs, they show a compelling case for obesity prevention, based on changes in our food environment and physical activity levels.

## What are the estimated costs of childhood overweight and obesity on the island of Ireland?



Over the past 3 decades, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased markedly in Ireland and worldwide. In the Republic of Ireland it is currently estimated that 60% of adults and 25% of children are overweight or obese. Obesity is a chronic disorder described by the World Health Organization as a condition of abnormal or excessive fat accumulation to the extent that health may be impaired. Excess body weight is associated with a significant burden of chronic disease, with attendant negative effects on overall

life expectancy, disability-free life expectancy, quality of life, healthcare costs and productivity.

**safefood** commissioned the research on current and projected lifetime costs of childhood overweight and obesity on the island of Ireland as part of its ongoing work to guide and inform our response to this public health crisis. The study led by the School of Public Health, University College Cork was a collaboration between UCC, the Institute of Public Health in Ireland; the Department of Public Health at HSE Mid-West, the National University of Ireland, Galway, Temple Street Children's University Hospital and the United Kingdom Health Forum (UKHF).

The research revealed the total lifetime cost to be €7.2billion euros (€4.6 billion in the Republic Of Ireland; £2.1 billion in Northern Ireland). The study also found that 21% of total costs in the Republic of Ireland represented direct healthcare costs i.e. hospital in-patient; out-patient; GP and drug costs. However, more than two thirds (79%) of the total lifetime costs were indirect costs due to absenteeism, premature mortality and lifetime income losses.

## Examples of other research



### *A review of Energy Drinks in Ireland*



Health is healthy is well

Energy drinks have risen in popularity in recent years and on the island of Ireland, they accounted for 20% of the total soft drinks market advertising spend in 2014. Energy drinks are marketed for their perceived or actual benefits as stimulants, for improving performance and for increasing energy. This report highlights that there is some confusion amongst the public as to what the term “energy drink” means, as some soft and sports drinks while containing little or no caffeine, use the term ‘energy’ in the product

label. The report provides details on the range of energy drinks available, their caffeine and calorie contents, their labelling and promotional practices, consumption levels and use with alcohol. The report found an eightfold increase in the number of energy drink products available for sale in 2015 compared with 2002.



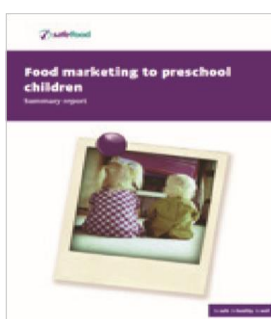
### *Cooking and food skills – the current picture*



Health is healthy is well

The increasing affordability and popularity of pre-prepared and packaged foods has led to some suggestions that cooking skills using raw, fresh ingredients are being lost and replaced by pre-prepared foodstuffs which are typically higher in fat, sugar and salt than raw ingredients. Evidence supports the link between food literacy (the range of knowledge and skills needed to prepare food) and the food choices people make. This report aimed to measure the food and cooking skills of adults, the healthiness of their diets

and understand the barriers to people cooking from scratch.



### *Food marketing to preschool children.*

This research involved over 170 children aged three to five years who were shown logos for nine food and drink brands, both healthy and unhealthy. It found that children who watched more television knew more about unhealthy food and drink brands than healthy brands. Also, parents' own eating habits and television viewing are linked to children's knowledge of unhealthy food brands. The research shows the need for further restrictions on marketing and advertising of foods high in fat, salt and sugar. In order to tackle childhood obesity and poor nutrition in children, we need to recognise the role of parents and advertising.