

The effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and policy processes of regulatory, voluntary and partnership policies to improve food environments: an evidence synthesis

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Poor diet is a leading cause of death, globally, including in the United Kingdom. It also causes many types of illness and is one of the biggest drains on the United Kingdom National Health Service budget.

Governments act in various ways to promote healthy diets by improving food environments: these are the physical and social surroundings that influence what and how much people eat. Some actions are regulated by government, for example, to control food production, marketing and promotions. Other actions are led by, or with, food businesses, making voluntary changes to the foods they produce, for example, by reducing salt content; this can be done by businesses alone or in partnership with government (referred to as 'public-private partnerships').

The six reviews of published research look at whether, and how, these actions to improve diets work, and whether they can provide value for money.

Most regulations appear to be effective at supporting better diets. However, voluntary changes led by businesses had limited success. There were not many evaluations that assessed the effectiveness of public-private partnerships. Of those that did, partnerships with the food industry had limited effectiveness, resulting in largely unchanged outcomes.

When looking at how these actions improve diets, we found that clear leadership, public support for the policy, the use of the best evidence and of local expertise helped with getting actions implemented. Factors that appear to make it harder to implement policy actions include a lack of evidence specific to the context, conflicting beliefs about what works, limited human or financial resources, lack of engagement by key people.

Although the findings may help us to think about the ways forward to improve diets, more research is needed to understand whether actions to reduce diet-related ill health work, and provide value for money.

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