



Obesity Action Scotland's Position Statement on Malnutrition

March 2021

We adopt and will use the World Health Organization's definition of malnutrition and call on the Scottish Government and any organisation operating in this area, to also adopt and use it.

Obesity Action Scotland was established in 2015 to provide clinical leadership and independent advocacy on preventing and reducing overweight and obesity in Scotland. While our work focuses on the implications of energy excess on the population level in Scotland, we recognise that drivers for this problem also drive other diet-related problems. Obesity is only one face of malnutrition. According to the World Health Organization malnutrition is:

Malnutrition¹ refers to deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in a person's intake of energy and/or nutrients. The term malnutrition addresses 3 broad groups of conditions:

- undernutrition, which includes wasting (low weight-for-height), stunting (low height-for-age) and underweight (low weight-for-age)
- micronutrient-related malnutrition, which includes micronutrient deficiencies (a lack of important vitamins and minerals) or micronutrient excess
- overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases (such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers)

World Health Organization, 2020

Malnutrition in all its Forms and Double Burden of Malnutrition

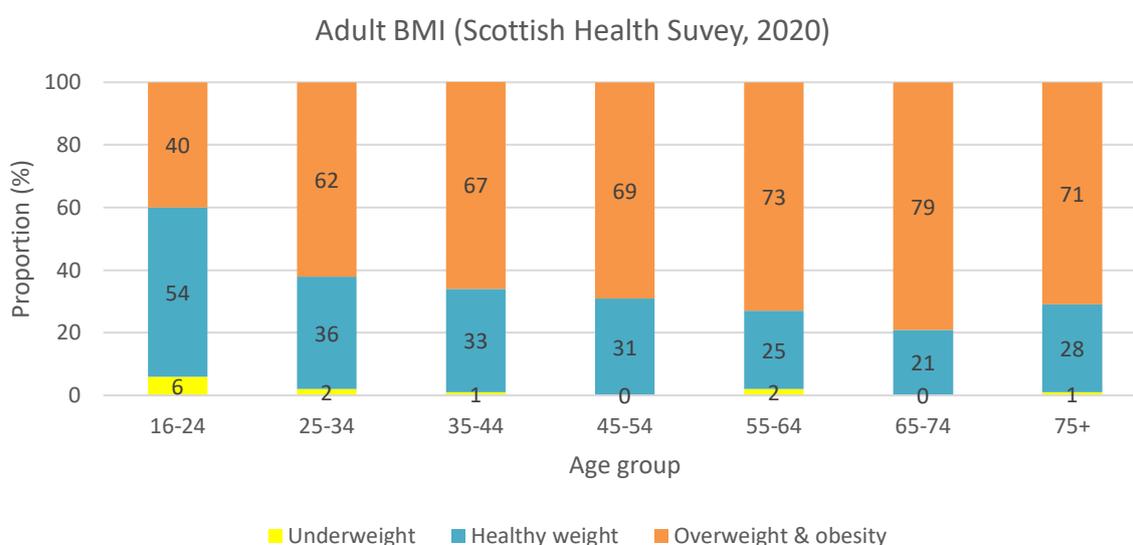
In recognition of the whole spectrum of diet-related problems, the terms of '*malnutrition in all its forms*' and '*double burden of malnutrition*' have been increasingly used worldwide.^{2,3,4} It is now recognised that undernutrition and obesity (together with diet-related non-communicable diseases), are intrinsically linked through four shared drivers: early life nutrition; dietary quality; food environments; and socioeconomic factors.⁵ Going even further, the most recent report of the Lancet Commission on Obesity recognised that obesity, undernutrition as well as climate change have common drivers (food and agriculture, transportation, urban design and land use).⁶

Double-duty actions, defined as actions that simultaneously address nutritional deficiencies and obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases, have been proposed as a win-win solution to tackling malnutrition in all its forms.⁴ The Lancet Commission on Obesity also suggested that shared

drivers require shared solutions. For example, promoting active transport would increase physical activity and reduce sedentary time (tackling obesity), improve food security by reducing emissions and catastrophic weather events (tackling undernutrition), and lower greenhouse gas emissions from polluting transport modes (tackling climate change).

Malnutrition explained by BMI

Calculation of Body Mass Index (BMI) is one of the methods to determine nutrition status. The Scottish Health Survey (2020)⁷ reported that BMI generally increased with age up to the age of 74 among all adults (increasing from 24.9 kg/m² among those aged 16-24 to 29.1 kg/m² among those aged 65-74) before decreasing to 27.9 kg/m² among those aged 75 and over. Patterns of mean BMI by age did not differ significantly between men and women. The chart below shows proportions of adults in different BMI groups, in 2019.



Malnutrition explained by diet

Dietary surveillance programme in Scotland monitors progress towards Scottish Dietary Goals (SDGs)⁸ and is led by Food Standards Scotland (FSS). Until recently, FSS conducted secondary analysis of the Living Costs and Food Survey Defra and the UK Office for National Statistics.⁹ Recently however, a pilot of Intake24, which is an online dietary recall system designed to collect detailed dietary intake data, was included in the Scottish Health Survey (SHeS) in 2018.¹⁰ Intake24 is a new methodology and direct comparison with the previous surveillance is not possible. However, the results broadly aligned with findings of other surveys, showing that **we are not meeting the majority of the SDGs** and that our diet in Scotland needs to change:

- Reported intakes of saturated fat (12.8%) and non-milk extrinsic sugars¹¹ (NMES) (11.9%) need to reduce
- Reported fruit and vegetable intake (2.9 portions per day) and fibre intake (15.9g per day) need to increase

The most recent data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) (2016 to 2017 and 2018 to 2019), that includes a Scottish sample within UK survey, highlighted very similar dietary issues.¹² Importantly, dietary inequities in Scotland exist: people living in most deprived areas consume more sugary drinks, savoury and meat pies, and sausages and burgers and less healthy food and drink than those living in least deprived areas.¹³ FSS have not highlighted any major dietary issues within specific age groups.

Implications for action on malnutrition in Scotland

To tackle malnutrition, we need a systemic approach.¹⁴ The first and basic step is across-the-board adoption of the up to date definition of the problem¹⁵ and thorough understanding of its current local, national and global extent. **Therefore, we adopt and will use the World Health Organization's definition of malnutrition and call on the Scottish Government and any organisation operating in this area, to also adopt and use it.**

Understanding of the whole spectrum of malnutrition across all age groups and life stages is key to effective action. Use of a historical definition of malnutrition, to mean only undernutrition, risks creating confusion and an unnecessary conflict in priorities and actions. In fact, a focus on tackling only one aspect of malnutrition could cause harm.¹⁶

Obesity Action Scotland's work

Obesity Action Scotland's work involves advocating for healthy weight through a strong focus on the food environment in Scotland, as demonstrated in our 2021 Scottish Parliament Election Manifesto.¹⁷ As the food environment is one of the common drivers for both undernutrition and obesity, this approach advocates for and promotes a comprehensive set of double-duty actions that will tackle malnutrition in all its forms.

¹ [Fact sheets - Malnutrition \(who.int\)](#)

² [Equity and the right to food: A systemic approach to tackling malnutrition - Global Nutrition Report](#)

³ [Tackling malnutrition in all its forms | Capacity4dev \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴ [WHO | Ending malnutrition in all its forms? A decade of opportunity](#)

⁵ [Double Duty Actions to Tackle All Forms of Malnutrition \(P10-053-19\) \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁶ [The Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change: The Lancet Commission report](#)

⁷ [Scottish Health Survey 2019 - volume 1: main report - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

⁸ [Dietary Goals for Scotland \(foodstandards.gov.scot\)](#)

⁹ [Latest estimation of food and nutrient intakes in Scotland | Food Standards Scotland](#)

¹⁰ [Pilot of Intake24 in the Scottish Health Survey | Food Standards Scotland](#)

¹¹ due to the food database used it was not possible to calculate free sugars for the Intake24 pilot. The only difference between the definition of free sugars and NMES is that NMES also includes 50% of the sugars found in dried, stewed or canned fruit and vegetables, whereas none of the sugars found in dried, stewed or canned fruit and vegetables are included within the definition of free sugars.

¹² [NDNS: results from years 9 to 11 \(2016 to 2017 and 2018 to 2019\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

¹³ [The Scottish Diet - It needs to change 2018 update | Food Standards Scotland](#)

¹⁴ [Equity and the right to food: A systemic approach to tackling malnutrition - Global Nutrition Report](#)

¹⁵ [Fact sheets - Malnutrition \(who.int\)](#)

¹⁶ Rue and Hawkes (2019) give the following example: “Latin America and Egypt show that some social cash/food transfer programs aimed at reducing poverty and undernutrition have led to deteriorations in diet quality (e.g., excess intakes of energy- fat- and sugar-dense and micronutrient-poor foods) and rises in obesity/dietary-related-NCD risks.” [Double Duty Actions to Tackle All Forms of Malnutrition \(P10-053-19\) \(nih.gov\)](#)

¹⁷ [Obesity Action Scotland | Healthy Weight For All - Obesity Action Scotland Launches 2021 Scottish Parliament Election Manifesto](#)