



NEWS RELEASE

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DANGER, HEARTBREAK DEAD AHEAD FOR TODAY'S YOUNG GENERATION UNLESS WE INVEST IN CHILDREN'S HEALTH

A collective failure to take responsibility for children's health and fitness is breaking hearts by raising children's risk of early death and illness from coronary heart disease, stroke and cancer in adulthood, according to the National Heart Forum (NHF). Launching *young@heart*, a major new framework of recommendations to tackle unhealthy lifestyles among children and young people, (Thursday 14 February, 2002), the NHF warns that inaction threatens huge and increasing demands on scarce NHS resources to treat preventable disease in 40 to 50 years' time.

The NHF sets government the target that every child born today should be able to live to at least the age of 65 free from avoidable coronary heart disease. The charity maintains that this is an achievable goal, but only if there is effective action to tackle the root causes of poor short and long term health among children and young people.

The NHF calls on the government to introduce a national plan for children's and young people's health and well-being to defuse a potential 'time-bomb' of ill health. The proposed plan should address the wide social, economic and environmental influences on health and incorporate national strategies to tackle the major modifiable factors which determine children's risk of later coronary heart disease: poor nutrition, physical inactivity and smoking.

An epidemic of coronary heart disease on the horizon

Latest figures show that death rates from coronary heart disease are falling, but the number of people living with the consequences of coronary heart disease is not dropping, and is rising substantially among the over 75s. "*Better treatments and surgical techniques mean that more people are surviving a heart attack,*" says Klim McPherson, vice chair of the NHF and professor of public health epidemiology in the department of social medicine at the University of Bristol.

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"Reducing death rates will be a hollow victory if we permit an epidemic of disease by ignoring the root causes of the problem. Rates for key risk factors for coronary heart disease, such as obesity and adult-onset diabetes are rising. Current estimates suggest that the number of people suffering from diabetes will double by 2010, and the number of people who are obese is increasing at a similar rate. Underlying the rise in these risk factors, on top of poor diet, is a marked increase in sedentary behaviour in all age groups, but it is particularly worrying how inactive children and young people are becoming and how rates of overweight and obesity have risen alarmingly among children in the last twenty years. Among 4 - 11 year olds, one in seven girls and one in ten boys is overweight. "

It is currently estimated that coronary heart disease costs the UK economy around £10 billion pounds every year: £1.6 billion in costs to the health services and a further £8.5 billion in days lost due to death, illness and informal care of people with the disease. It is estimated that effective public health interventions could reduce the burden of avoidable coronary heart disease and costs to the health services by up to 30 per cent. Failure to act will mean these figures are likely to rise.

Coronary heart disease – the early origins

"There is a substantial body of evidence to suggest that to prevent coronary heart disease in the adult we must begin with the child," says Professor David Wood, vice chair of the NHF and professor of cardiovascular medicine at Charing Cross Hospital, London. "Heart attacks are rare before middle age, but the early signs of coronary heart disease are already apparent in some children and adolescents. Atherosclerosis (fatty deposits in the walls of the arteries) has been found in children as young as two years old. By the age of 20, it may be present in as many as one in three young people,"¹ adds Professor Wood.

"Poor nutrition in early life (especially while a baby is growing in the womb and during infancy) can cause irreversible damage to the developing heart. To protect the long term health of the next generation, it is vital that expectant mothers have enough money to afford a healthy diet that is adequate for themselves and their growing baby, and that mothers are encouraged and given support to breastfeed."

Children are growing up in a 'cardiotoxic' environment

"Looking ahead, in an average class of 30 pupils, two are likely to suffer a heart attack, thirteen will become obese and three will develop diabetes before they are 65 if current trends persist towards more sedentary pastimes and a diet dominated by chips, biscuits, crisps and sweets," according to Paul Lincoln, chief executive of the National Heart Forum.

"Fewer places to play or walk safe from traffic or the threat of crime, dwindling PE lessons and sports facilities, and a monotonous diet of advertisements for foods high in fat, sugar and salt; taken together are creating a 'cardiotoxic' environment for children and young people," he added.

The one in three children who grow up in poverty are most vulnerable. These children are more likely to smoke and eat a poorer diet - in part because it is less costly - that is high in fat and low in fruit and vegetables.

"A healthy society is one which actively protects the health of its young and does not abandon children to the market forces of the food and tobacco industries. Government, local authorities and industry must recognise and act upon a collective responsibility for children's health," says Mr Lincoln.

A comprehensive plan for children's health

"Children's health is far too important to leave to chance," says Sir Alexander Macara, chairman of the National Heart Forum. *"There is a yawning gap in policy on child health. Under 16s make up one-fifth of the UK population, yet public health initiatives aimed at the young lack the priority and the resources given to adult interventions. Young@heart makes the case for a common health-promoting agenda for national and local government policy, and links with current priorities to tackle both child poverty and coronary heart disease. A piecemeal approach must be replaced with Cabinet level commitment to tackle the social, environmental and economic determinants of ill health across all government departments which make a real difference in communities, schools and to commercial practices."*

Young@heart includes recommendations to:

Reformulate minimum income standards so that all families can afford the essential requisites to give their children a healthy start in life;

Make health promoting policies a requirement in all schools and included as part of school inspections;

Introduce national targets for the quality and uptake of school meals;

Undertake a national inquiry into the impact of advertising and promotions (particularly of food and tobacco) on family and child health;

Make existing programmes, such as Sure Start and the Connexions service available to all children, families and young people;

Invest in public health training, standards and recruitment to support professionals working with children and families to promote and protect health;

Involve children and young people in policy making, nationally and locally.

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Notes to editors:

1. ¹ Berenson GS, Srinivasan SR, Bao W et al. 1998. Association between multiple cardiovascular risk factors and atherosclerosis in children and young adults. *New England Journal of Medicine*; 338; 23: 1650-56.
2. The National Heart Forum is an alliance of over 40 organisations working to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease in the UK. Member organisations represent the medical and health services, professional bodies, consumer groups and voluntary organisations.
3. The *young@heart* policy framework document *Towards a generation free from coronary heart disease* will be launched at the House of Lords on Thursday, 14 February 2002. The recommendations are the result of an extensive process of scientific and policy review by the National Heart Forum, involving a wide range of expert contributors in public health, children's welfare, health economics and education.
4. The *young@heart* initiative is generously supported by the British Heart Foundation, Nuffield Trust and the Health Development Agency.