Position Statement

Royal College of Surgeons
FACULTY OF DENTAL SURGERY

Combatting cake culture: reducing excessive sugar consumption in the workplace

Introduction

Cake culture has become a prominent feature of modern working life, as managers look to reward staff for their efforts, colleagues want to celebrate special occasions, and workers want to bring back gifts from their holidays. Sharing occasional treats such as cakes, sweets and biscuits can play an important part in office life.

However, the rise of cake culture means that the workplace is becoming one of the main sites of daily sugar consumption for many office workers, and it is important to highlight and address the wider health impacts of what is eaten at work.

With around 63% of adults in England either obese or overweight[1] and nearly 64,000 over-18s being admitted to hospital because of tooth decay in 2015-16,[2] there is a real need to tackle excessive sugar consumption in order to improve public health and reduce the cost to the NHS of dealing with such problems. Moderating sugar consumption at work is an important opportunity to tackle this.

Last Christmas, confectionary was the fastest growing food category in value sales for UK supermarkets, with a year on year increase of 8.8%.[3] According to one estimate, £219m was spent on Christmas cakes and confectionary for the two weeks prior to 26 December 2015.[4] The start of

the new year therefore offers an ideal opportunity to make a commitment to combat cake culture, with healthier lifestyles likely to be a focus for many people's New Year's resolutions. Last year, 40% of people made a resolution to lose weight, and 24% said they wanted to eat more healthily.[5]

With this in mind, the Faculty of Dental Surgery has developed the following advice for cutting back on sugar consumption in the workplace. In addition, employers and the Government can take action to support staff and consumers to make healthier choices, and this briefing highlights ways in which they can play their part as well.

Improving public health and tackling challenges such as obesity requires action across a number of different areas – promoting more active lifestyles is another vital strand, with the Health and Fitness section of the NHS Choices website providing useful advice on getting fit and exercising. A good diet is key however, and being aware of what we eat at work and taking action to reduce excessive sugar consumption is an important part of enhancing our health.

Reducing our sugar consumption at work

There are a number of small but significant things that can be done to

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reduce sugar intake at work, without having to cut out cake entirely. For those looking to eat more healthily in 2017, the Faculty of Dental Surgery has produced **5 Top Tips** for reducing sugar consumption at work:

1. **Consider low sugar alternatives:** Colleagues appreciate it when someone takes the time to buy treats for the team. But rather than always buying sugary goods like biscuits and sweets, consider substituting them for low sugar alternatives.

2. **Reduce portion sizes:** Think about reducing portion sizes – choose the small bag rather than the big one.

3. **Avoid snacking and keep sugar as a lunchtime treat:** If someone does bring cake or sweets to the office, avoid snacking throughout the day and only consume sugary goods at lunchtime. Not only does this help reduce your overall sugar intake, it's also much better for teeth.

   Every time we consume sugar it fuels acid formation by oral bacteria, which gradually softens tooth enamel and ultimately leads to decay. Avoiding regular snacking therefore means teeth come under attack less frequently, so limiting sugar intake to mealtimes (when we also tend to consume less sugary food than if we snack between meals) can have real benefits for oral health.

4. **Develop a sugar schedule to help limit your team's sugar intake:** There may be times when cake keeps appearing in the office, as birthdays or other events seem to be happening almost every day. One way to limit sugar consumption at such times is to organise a sugar schedule. For example, if there are birthdays on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, arrange to have cake at Friday lunchtime to celebrate all three, rather than on each individual day.

5. **Location, location, location – think carefully about where cake and sugar is positioned:** Research suggests that people will eat more sweets if they are nearby and visible than if they are placed further away.[6] Therefore, think about where sugary products are positioned in the office and put them out of eyesight.

Change 4 Life's [Sugar Smart app](#) is a useful resource when considering daily sugar consumption, and provides a visual reminder of the amount of sugar in the products you buy using sugar cubes.

This helps to illustrate how sugar intake can often build up without noticing, and that taking what may seem like small steps to cut back can potentially make a big difference. It also highlights that sugary drinks can make a very significant contribution to our daily sugar intake as well as sugary foods – therefore, switching to healthier alternatives such as water can play a major part in reducing daily sugar consumption too.

What can employers do?

Employers have an important role in supporting their workers' health and wellbeing, and can play their part in reducing office sugar consumption.

A number of large organisations are taking action to support their staff to make healthier choices and reduce their sugar

intake. For example, in November 2016 NHS England launched a consultation on reducing the sale of sugar-sweetened drinks on its premises, with proposed action including the introduction of a new fee to be paid by vendors selling sugary drinks and potentially an outright ban.[7]

Meanwhile, Google is another organisation who have sought to address this issue using insights from nudge theory, as discussed in further detail in the case study box.

Other employers can follow these examples by thinking about how they can help their staff to make healthier choices. This could include simple things like:

- Substituting sugary products available in meetings, like biscuits, for lower sugar alternatives, such as plain nuts and fruit.

- Reviewing the content of office vending machines and removing high sugar products.

- Ensuring that lower sugar options are always available in staff canteens and making sugary products less visible.

In addition, employers can play a significant role in signposting their staff to Government advice about maintaining a healthy lifestyle and good oral health, and promoting key public health messages, including on wider issues such as the importance of exercising regularly and staying active.

NHS Choices offers [information](#) on your recommended daily sugar consumption and how to cut down, while campaigns such as [5 A Day](#), [Change 4 Life](#), [Sugar Smart](#) and Public Health England's [Eatwell Guide](#) also provide very valuable advice on staying healthy. Employers can be proactive in raising awareness of such

initiatives amongst their workers, for example through staff newsletters or the company intranet.

Case Study: Google's use of nudge theory [8]

In his book *Work Rules!* Google's Laszlo Bock explains how the company used insights from 'nudge theory,' which seeks to influence individual choices through environmental cues, to encourage employees to eat more healthily.

At Google's staff canteens, sweets were placed in opaque containers making them less visible and harder to reach, with healthy alternatives much more prominent. As a result, its New York employees ate **3.1m fewer calories** over the course of 7 weeks.

Another strategy was the use of smaller plates, which encouraged Google staff to eat smaller portions and therefore fewer calories.

What can Government do?

There are also a number of Government interventions that would help reduce sugar consumption in the workplace. While Government has little direct influence on what people choose to eat, it can encourage people to make healthier choices through certain indirect measures.

One prime example is the **soft drinks industry levy**, which the Government plans to introduce from April 2018. This will apply an additional charge to producers and importers of soft drinks which contain a certain volume of added sugar, in order to encourage them to reformulate their products and reduce sugar content. Research published recently in The Lancet suggests that the levy has the potential to drive significant

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health benefits for adults and children, including reductions in levels of obesity, tooth decay and diabetes.[9] The Faculty is a member of the Obesity Health Alliance which is supporter of the policy, and **strongly urges the Government to implement the levy in full.**

Another valuable step that Government could take is to tighten rules around price promotions and the in-store location of sugary products, so that when people go to the shops to buy supplies for the office, they are not tempted to buy excessive amounts of sugary snacks on promotion.

Food and drink on **price promotion** represents around 40% of expenditure on food and drink in the UK, compared to around 20% in other European countries.[10] The increased volume of sugary products bought as a result of price promotions is not thought to reduce purchasing of non-promoted sugary goods. This means that restricting price promotions is likely to reduce the overall purchasing of sugary goods, rather than encourage consumers to instead purchase non-promoted sugary products.

In addition, evidence suggests that food products placed at the **point of sale** (POS) and end of the aisle are sold in higher quantities.[11] Given that 89% of the products displayed in convenience supermarkets at the POS have been deemed unhealthy,[12] removing such products from POS has the potential to reduce purchasing and therefore consumption of unhealthy foods.

The Faculty therefore recommends: **That the Government should work with supermarkets and other food retailers to restrict price promotions on sugary products, and replace high sugar foods at the point of sale with healthier alternatives. If necessary, legislation should be introduced in future to address this.**

Conclusion

Celebrating success with colleagues is a fundamental part of modern office culture, and treating ourselves once in a while to mark something significant can play an important part in this. However, with the rise of cake culture the workplace is becoming one of the main places we consume sugar, so we must find the right balance and think carefully about the impact of what we eat at work on our wider health.

With many people likely to start 2017 with new determination to eat more healthily and lose weight, it is important to remember that there are small but significant things that employees and employers can do to reduce sugar consumption in the office, and measures that the Government can implement to encourage healthier choices too.

There are real benefits to reducing the nation's sugar intake, both in terms of improving our individual health and tackling the long-term cost to the NHS of obesity and tooth decay, so 2017 dawns it provides the perfect opportunity to make an effort to tackle cake culture in workplaces across the country.

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