

Act now to halt obesity epidemic, doctors plead as they draw up action plan including proposals for a tax on fizzy drinks and ban on fast-food outlets near schools

- **Academy of Medical Royal Colleges called for urgent action to tackle problem**
- **Proposals include experimental 20 per cent tax on sugary soft drinks**
- **Also said hospitals should get rid of vending machines selling unhealthy food**

By Lucy Osborne



Growing problem: The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has drawn up an action plan in response to worrying obesity rates in the UK (posed by a model)

Doctors have demanded a 20 per cent tax on fizzy drinks and a ban on fast-food outlets near schools to tackle Britain's obesity problem.

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has drawn up an action plan in response to the UK's current status as the fat man of Europe.

Among the proposals is an experimental 20 per cent tax on sugary soft drinks, like that in operation in parts of the US, for at least a year.

The potential annual yield of £1billion could help fund weight management programmes, the academy said. It added that councils should limit the number of fast food outlets allowed to operate near schools, colleges, leisure centres and other places where children gather.

Another recommendation was that hospitals get rid of vending machines selling unhealthy products on their premises. The academy said it is 'perplexing' to find canteens in hospitals selling unhealthy dishes, and 'even more astonishing that in many hospital receptions patients pass by high street fast food franchises or vending machines selling confectionary, drinks and crisps'.

New parents, the organisation continues, should be taught by health experts how to feed their children properly, to avoid them getting hooked on sweet or fatty foods while still very young.

In addition, NHS staff should routinely talk to overweight patients about their eating and exercise habits at every appointment under a policy of 'making every contact count'.

The academy, which effectively speaks for the entire medical profession, said urgent action is needed from ministers, the NHS, councils and food producers to break the cycle of 'generation after generation falling victim to obesity-related illnesses and death'.

Its report says doctors are 'united in seeing the epidemic of obesity as the greatest public health crisis facing the UK'.



Plans: The academy has come up with a number of recommendations, including that hospitals should get rid of vending machines selling unhealthy products on their premises

Its members criticised attempts by successive governments to solve the problem as 'piecemeal and disappointingly ineffective'.

The academy proposals follow a year-long inquiry into the country's spiralling weight crisis. One in four adults in England is obese, and figures are predicted to rise to 60 per cent of men, half of women and a quarter of children by 2050.

The academy recommends that the NHS spends at least £300million over the next three years to tackle a serious shortage in weight-management programmes, so more patients can be helped 'in a supportive and sensitive manner'. Academy chairman Professor Terence Stephenson said the report did not claim to offer a full solution to the obesity epidemic, but 'it does say we need together to do more, starting right now, before the problem becomes worse and the NHS can no longer cope'.

The report claims it contains measures that 'society as a whole needs to take to prevent the obesity crisis becoming unresolvable'.

It adds: 'Just as the challenges of persuading society that the deeply embedded habit of smoking was against its better interests, changing how we eat and exercise is now a matter of necessity.' The academy's guidelines will be announced in full today.