**Vitality to help curb the obesogenic crisis**

*Our global Vitality panel discuss the need for healthy nutrition ‘nudging’ through support structures, choice architecture and the right rewards to counter obesity.*

As of this year, more than 1 billion people are overweight or obese. That’s around 35% of the global population – and growing. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO)[[1]](#footnote-1) predicts that if we continue on this current trajectory, nearly half of the world’s adult population will be overweight or obese by 2030.

Why is this such cause for concern? According to Tonja Dodd, Senior Health Strategy Analyst at Vitality USA, the problem is both at an individual level and a societal one. “Firstly, rising obesity rates are linked to poorer health outcomes with obese people being far more likely to be affected by diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and chronic respiratory disease,” she says, adding that these four main non-communicable diseases contribute to 71% of all deaths globally[[2]](#footnote-2).

“In addition to the severity of these health concerns for the individual, the economic impact of obesity on society is just as staggering. Billions of dollarsare lost each year – roughly equivalent to the global impact from war and terrorism[[3]](#footnote-3) – through costs linked to society, businesses and the healthcare system.”

**Obesity as the crisis; nutrition as the challenge**

“Globally, we live in an obesogenic environment,” says James Vickers, nutrition expert at Vitality UK. “This means we are in an environment that makes eating healthily and maintaining a healthy weight difficult due to various social, behavioral and environmental factors.” According to Vickers, this all contributes to the challenges with healthy eating, balanced diets and prioritizing the right nutrition. “There is temptation everywhere,” he adds. “And it’s becoming more and more difficult to choose the healthy option over the *often-more-appealing-and-easily-accessible* unhealthy choice.” His nutrition colleague at Vitality UK, Ryan James, agrees. “Our current food environment is setting us up for failure – there is an abundance of unhealthy, overly processed food that is easily accessible.”

In order to address this, the Vitality program focuses on three key areas to encourage and incentivize members to (1) buy better, (2) cook more often, and (3) eat healthier.

“At Vitality, we prioritize good nutrition as part of healthy living,” adds James. “Our core purpose is to make people healthier through our Shared Value Insurance Model. Here, we offer incentives to shift lifestyle behaviors – in this case, nutrition behaviors. The goal is to improve our members’ health outcomes and lower healthcare costs at the same time.”

**Shared value nutrition … in action**

“The good news is that there’s strong evidence that links an increased intake of vegetables and fruit to the reduced risk of lifestyle-related diseases, including obesity-linked diseases,” says Terry Harris, Dietician at Vitality. “So, interventions that can help with this are greatly needed.”

The Vitality HealthyFood benefit is one such intervention – and one of the most loved Vitality benefits. Through this benefit, people are encouraged to buy healthy food at partner grocery stores which unlocks cost-saving discounts. All Vitality members are eligible for this benefit, at no additional cost to them, with an immediate 10% rebate for healthy foods, which increases to 25% once a health review questionnaire has been completed.

“We select grocery store partners who share our values, offer a significant selection of healthier options, and are willing to work with us on the journey of positive behavior change,” says Harris.

“In this way, we nudge you to eat healthier,” she adds, saying: “We make it easy, accessible, and appealing from a cost perspective.” As members become healthier, more money is saved which can then be channelled back into the program, providing richer rewards for healthy behaviors – “fuelling a virtuous cycle of health improvement and value creation.”

**Buy, cook, eat more healthily**

So, what does this look like in numbers? Between the launch of the HealthyFood benefit in 2015 to the end of December 2021, this benefit has contributed to the sale of 530 million healthy food items. “We’ve had some incredible insights come from this benefit,” says Jonathan Dugas, Director of Clinical Development for Vitality USA. A study[[4]](#footnote-4) published in the *American Journal of Health Behavior* – with data from over 300 000 of our Vitality members in South Africa – showed that when these members are incentivized with cashback and Vitality points for buying healthy items, they changed their consumption.

“It’s significant,” adds Dugas. “We’re talking 0.64 more servings of fruits and vegetables daily, being 3x more likely to eat 3(+) daily wholegrain servings, up to 65% less likely to regularly eat foods high in sugar and up to 72% less likely to regularly eat fast food. This clearly demonstrates that incentives are able to positively shift member food purchases.”

Research from the Discovery Data Science[[5]](#footnote-5) Lab goes further, showing that a healthier shopping basket is associated with a 4.2% reduction in weight – and a ±US$50 reduction in health claims annually for every engaged member.

**Small changes, sustainable impact**

“Sustainable weight loss does not happen overnight but instead relies on us making small, gradual and consistent changes that add up over time,” Lianne Jacobs, Health Communications Strategist for Vitality USA. “At Vitality we endorse evidence-based changes such as reducing portion sizes or cooking food at home more often, as well as incorporating behavioral economics principles[[6]](#footnote-6) to make the healthy choice, the easy choice.” Jacobs suggests that a simple example would be to place unhealthy foods out of reach (and sight!) while making healthy foods more accessible.

“Once you have bought the healthy food items, it’s important to then know what to do with them”, adds Jacobs. “Cooking at home, more often, is a cornerstone of building healthier habits for both you and your family”. The Vitality program[[7]](#footnote-7) empowers members to cook at home using healthy ingredients and simple recipes. In South Africa, Vitality launched the Vitality HealthyFood Studio to further support this – a bespoke kitchen where Vitality members can join a qualified team of chefs for cooking classes with their friends and family. In the US, The Vitality Kitchen on showcases quick, healthy, simple recipes in action on Instagram.

**Don’t fall for pseudo-science**

When it comes to topics centered around diet and nutrition, there is so much advice out there – some reputable, some not – and so it’s easy for the average person to get caught up in dietary trends that aren’t always the healthiest or achievable long-term. A big part of the Vitality program is about credible, research-backed nutrition that promotes sustainable behavioral change. “It’s not just about making the healthy choice once, but making that healthy choice over and over again,” says Jacobs.

Vitality’s nutrition strategy aims to de-clutter the complex dietary space. The aim is to help members make healthier food choices and adopt healthier eating patterns, in turn decreasing the prevalence of lifestyle-related diseases and their associated long-term complications.

**The bottom line**

As part of World Obesity Day, celebrated annually around the globe in March, WHO calls on all stakeholders – both at a country level and private businesses – to do more to reverse what Vitality considers a preventable health crisis. “Through our Vitality initiatives, we hope to continue to answer this call,” says Dodd.

“There’s no quick fix for the obesity epidemic, and the responsibility lies with all of us. A combination of our human nature – finding ways to maintain healthy habits despite our own health history and psychological relationship with food and the subconscious way that we are hard-wired to eat – combined with the modern ‘food jungle’ environment of large portion sizes, low prices and insidious food advertising[[8]](#footnote-8), are all contributors to the growing obesity concern.”

The Discovery Vitality program demonstrates that better health has a positive economic impact on society: the healthier a population, the healthier the economy. These principles are what help to drive Vitality’s commitment to finding new, innovative ways to continue promoting healthier living – from the grocery store, into our own kitchens and onto our plates.

1. World Health Organization (WHO). 2018. Noncommunicable diseases. [Link.](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. World Health Organization (WHO). 2018. Deaths from NCDs. [Link.](https://www.who.int/gho/ncd/mortality_morbidity/ncd_total/en/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Discovery Vitality. 2017. The Vitality ObeCity Index. [Link.](https://www.vitalitygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-Vitality-ObeCity-Index_final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Discovery Vitality. 2021. The Science of Vitality. [Link.](https://www.discovery.co.za/site/binaries/content/documents/managedcontent/discoverycoza/assets/vitality/science-of-vitality/the-science-of-vitality-journal.pdf/the-science-of-vitality-journal.pdf/contentdelivery%3Abinary) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Discovery Vitality. 2021. The Science of Vitality. [Link.](https://www.discovery.co.za/site/binaries/content/documents/managedcontent/discoverycoza/assets/vitality/science-of-vitality/the-science-of-vitality-journal.pdf/the-science-of-vitality-journal.pdf/contentdelivery%3Abinary) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 Reijula, S & Hertwig, R. 2020. Self-nudging and the citizen choice architect. [Link.](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340205842_Self-nudging_and_the_citizen_choice_architect) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 Discovery Vitality. 2017. The Vitality ObeCity Index. [Link.](https://www.vitalitygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-Vitality-ObeCity-Index_final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Discovery Vitality. 2017. The Vitality ObeCity Index. [Link.](https://www.vitalitygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-Vitality-ObeCity-Index_final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)