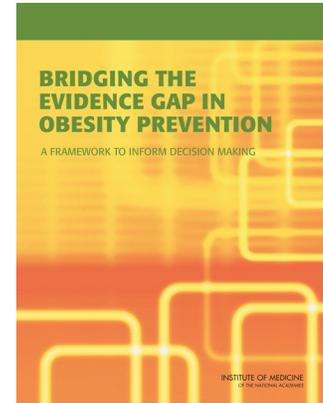


For more information visit www.iom.edu/obesityframework

Bridging the Evidence Gap in Obesity Prevention

A Framework to Inform Decision Making



About 68 percent of adults in the United States aged 20 years or older are either overweight or obese. Among children, the rate is nearly 32 percent. The obesity epidemic poses major challenges for policy makers, public health professionals, and other decision makers who need to act decisively to respond to this widespread health problem. To inform their decisions, they need relevant and useful evidence on promising obesity prevention actions for the populations they serve.

In 2008, Kaiser Permanente asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to develop a practical, action-oriented framework to guide the use of evidence in decision making about obesity prevention policies and programs and to guide the generation of new and relevant evidence. The IOM convened a committee that sought the answers to two fundamental questions:

1. How can evidence that is currently available and potentially relevant to decisions about obesity prevention be identified, evaluated, and compiled in ways that will best inform decisions?
2. How can more evidence be developed that is of high quality and framed to be directly relevant to decision making on obesity prevention?

The committee reviewed what is considered to be the relevant information base for community, environmental, and policy-based obesity prevention initiatives, revealing a clear evidence gap. In response to this gap, and its causes, the committee developed the L.E.A.D. framework process, short for **L**ocate evidence, **E**valuate it, **A**ssemble it, and **I**nform **D**ecisions. Using the framework, shown in Figure 1, involves innovative approaches to generating,

How can evidence that is currently available and potentially relevant to decisions about obesity prevention be identified, evaluated, and compiled in ways that will best inform decisions?

identifying, evaluating, and compiling evidence—taking a broad, transdisciplinary perspective.

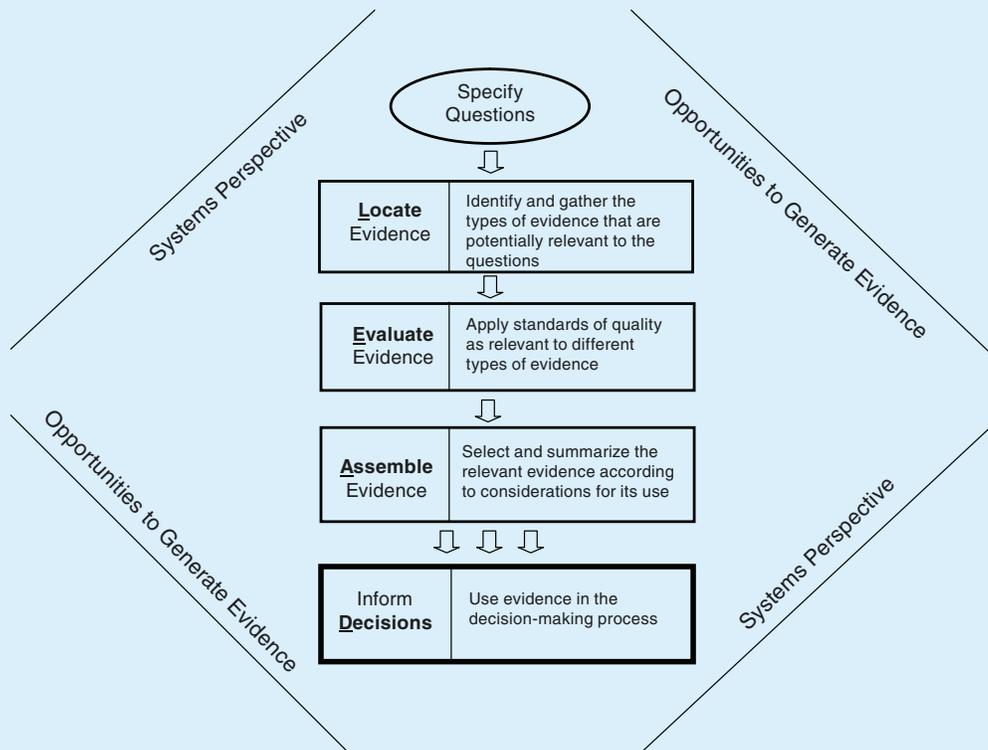
Overall, the framework encourages decision makers and researchers to look at obesity from a systems perspective in order to understand it as a complex, population-based health problem. The framework user begins by specifying the question(s) that the decision maker needs to answer. In locating evidence that can answer these questions, the user then focuses on taking full advantage of the available research methods for studying population-based problems, not just those used in medical research. The framework also emphasizes that each type of evidence should be evaluated using criteria for assessing quality that are appropriate and established for this type of evidence. This framework process provides guidelines for assembling and compiling evidence in an open and transparent way, placing it in a real

world context in order to inform decisions. The framework offers opportunities to generate useful, high-quality evidence for decision making at every step, and encourages learning from ongoing policies and practices, alternatives to randomized experiments, and reporting of information on the generalizability of research results to other individuals, settings, contexts, and time frames.

Next Steps

Decision makers, the intermediaries who assist them in making decisions, and researchers working on obesity prevention and other complex public health problems are the primary audiences for communicating and disseminating the L.E.A.D. framework. It will be important to make them aware of and knowledgeable about the frame-

Figure 1: L.E.A.D. Framework for Obesity Prevention Decision Making



Overall, the framework encourages decision makers and researchers to look at obesity from a systems perspective in order to understand it as a complex, population-based health problem.

Recommendations:

Utilize the L.E.A.D. Framework

Actors: Decision makers and those involved in generating evidence, including researchers, research funders, and publishers of research

Action: Apply the L.E.A.D. framework as a guide in their utilization and generation of evidence to support decision making for complex, multifactorial public health challenges, including obesity prevention

Incorporate Systems Thinking

Actors: Researchers, government and private funders, educators, and journal editors

Action: Incorporate systems thinking into their research-related activities

Build a Resource Base

Actors: Government, foundations, professional organizations, and research institutions

Action: Build a system of resources (such as people, compendiums of knowledge, registries of implementation experience) to support evidence-based public policy decision making and research for complex health challenges, including obesity prevention

Establish Standards for Evidence Quality

Actors: Government, foundations, professional organizations, and research institutions

Actions: Catalyze and support the establishment of guidance on standards for evaluating the quality of evidence for which such standards are lacking

Support the Generation of Evidence

Actors: Obesity prevention research funders, researchers, and publishers

Action: Consider, wherever appropriate, the inclusion in research studies of a focus on the generalizability of the findings and related implementation issues at every stage, from conception through publication

Actors: Research funders

Action: Increase opportunities for those carrying out obesity prevention initiatives to measure and share their outcomes so others can learn from their experience

Actors: Funders

Action: Encourage collaboration among researchers in a variety of disciplines so as to utilize a full range of research designs that may be feasible and appropriate for evaluating obesity prevention and related public health initiatives

Communicate, Disseminate, Evaluate, and Refine the L.E.A.D. Framework

Actor: A public-private consortium

Actions: Bring together researchers, research funders, publishers of research, decision makers, and other stakeholders to discuss the practical uses of the L.E.A.D. framework and to develop plans and a timeline for focused experimentation with the framework and for its evaluation and potential refinement



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work so that they can apply it as a guide for supporting decision making and for generating needed evidence. Evaluation of the use and impact of the framework also will be critical so that it can be improved and refined. In addition, it is crucial for government and private funders, research institutions and educators, journal editors, and professional organizations to take on the challenges of incorporating systems thinking; building a resource base of relevant evidence; establishing standards for evidence quality where needed; and funding and publishing research that generates evidence that is relevant to community, environmental, and policy-based obesity prevention initiatives (see recommendations).

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for useful evidence about potential policy and programmatic solutions to the obesity epidemic. Decision makers, their intermediaries, and researchers can apply the L.E.A.D. framework in order to generate, identify, evaluate, and assemble evidence to support the decisions that must be made about obesity prevention. If they are able to collect and use the best available evidence and work with researchers to generate additional useful evidence, decision makers will be armed with the most appropriate and relevant knowledge to help turn around this overwhelming national health crisis. 

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