

Correlates of overall and central obesity in adults from seven European countries: findings from the Food4Me Study

Article

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1 **Correlates of overall and central obesity in adults from seven European countries: Findings from the Food4Me**
2 **Study**

3 **Running title:** Correlates of obesity

4 **Authors**

5 Carlos Celis-Morales^{1,2*}, Katherine M Livingstone^{1*}, Alexander Affleck², Santiago Navas-Carretero³, Rodrigo San-
6 Cristobal³, J Alfredo Martinez³, Cyril F M Marsaux⁴, Wim H M Saris⁴, Clare B O'Donovan⁵, Hannah Forster⁵, Clara
7 Woolhead⁵, Eileen R Gibney⁵, Marianne C Walsh⁵, Lorraine Brennan⁵, Mike Gibney⁵, George Moschonis⁶, Christina-
8 Paulina Lambrinou⁶, Christina Mavrogianni⁶, Yannis Manios⁶, Anna L Macready⁷, Rosalind Fallaize⁷, Julie A
9 Lovegrove⁷, Silvia Kolossa⁸, Hannelore Daniel⁸, Iwona Traczyk⁹, Christian A Drevon¹⁰, John C Mathers¹, on behalf of
10 the Food4Me Study.

11
12 **Author affiliations**

13 ¹ Human Nutrition Research Centre, Institute of Cellular Medicine, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

14 ² BHF Glasgow Cardiovascular Research Centre, Institute of Cardiovascular and Medical Sciences, University of
15 Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8TA, United Kingdom.

16 ³ Department of Nutrition, Food Science and Physiology, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain.

17 ⁴Department of Human Biology, NUTRIM, School for Nutrition and Translational Research in Metabolism, Maastricht
18 University Medical Centre, Maastricht, The Netherlands

19 ⁵ UCD Institute of Food and Health, UCD School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin, Belfield,
20 Dublin 4, Republic of Ireland

21 ⁶ Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Harokopio University, Athens, Greece.

22 ⁷ Hugh Sinclair Unit of Human Nutrition and Institute for Cardiovascular and Metabolic Research, University of
23 Reading, Reading, UK.

24 ⁸ ZIEL Research Center of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Biochemistry Unit, Technische Universität München,
25 Germany.

26 ⁹ Human Nutrition Department, Faculty of Health Sciences, Medical University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland.

27 ¹⁰ Department of Nutrition, Institute of Basic Medical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.

28 * These authors contributed equally to this work

29

30 **Corresponding author**

31 Professor John C. Mathers

32 Human Nutrition Research Centre

33 Institute of Cellular Medicine

34 Newcastle University

35 Campus for Ageing and Vitality

36 Newcastle upon Tyne

37 NE4 5PL

38 UK

39 john.mathers@newcastle.ac.uk

40 Tel: +44 (0) 1912081133

41 Fax: +44 (0) 1912081101

42 **Background/Objectives:** To identify predictors of obesity in adults and investigate to what extent these predictors are
43 independent of other major confounding factors.

44 **Subjects/Methods:** Data collected at baseline from 1,441 participants from the Food4Me study conducted in seven
45 European countries were included in this study. A food frequency questionnaire was used to measure dietary intake;
46 Accelerometers were used to assess physical activity levels (PA), whereas participants self-reported their body weight,
47 height and waist circumference via the internet.

48 **Results:** The main factors associated ($p < 0.05$) with higher BMI per 1-SD increase in the exposure were age ($\beta: 1.11$
49 kg/m^2), and intakes of processed meat ($\beta: 1.04 \text{ kg/m}^2$), red meat ($\beta: 1.02 \text{ kg/m}^2$), saturated fat ($\beta: 0.84 \text{ kg/m}^2$),
50 monounsaturated fat ($\beta: 0.80 \text{ kg/m}^2$), protein ($\beta: 0.74 \text{ kg/m}^2$), total energy intake ($\beta: 0.50 \text{ kg/m}^2$), olive oil ($\beta: 0.36$
51 kg/m^2), sugar sweetened carbonated drinks ($\beta: 0.33 \text{ kg/m}^2$) and sedentary time ($\beta: 0.73 \text{ kg/m}^2$). In contrast, the main
52 factors associated with lower BMI per 1-SD increase in the exposure were PA ($\beta: -1.36 \text{ kg/m}^2$), and intakes of
53 wholegrains ($\beta: -1.05 \text{ kg/m}^2$), fibre ($\beta: -1.02 \text{ kg/m}^2$), fruits and vegetables ($\beta: -0.52 \text{ kg/m}^2$), nuts ($\beta: -0.52 \text{ kg/m}^2$),
54 polyunsaturated fat ($\beta: -0.50 \text{ kg/m}^2$), Healthy Eating Index ($\beta: -0.42 \text{ kg/m}^2$), Mediterranean diet score ($\beta: -0.40 \text{ kg/m}^2$),
55 oily fish ($\beta: -0.31 \text{ kg/m}^2$), dairy ($\beta: -0.31 \text{ kg/m}^2$) and fruit juice ($\beta: -0.25 \text{ kg/m}^2$).

56 **Conclusions:** These findings are important for public health and suggest that, promotion of increased PA, reduced
57 sedentary behaviours and improving the overall quality of dietary patterns are important strategies for addressing the
58 existing obesity epidemic and associated disease burden.

59 **Key Words** – Obesity; physical activity, diet, healthy eating index, Mediterranean diet.

60 **Trial registration** – Clinicaltrials.gov NCT01530139

61 INTRODUCTION

62 Excess adiposity, represented by high body-mass index (BMI) and waist circumference (WC), is a known risk factor for
63 cardiovascular diseases , some cancers, and premature mortality.¹ A recent study conducted in more than 19.2 million
64 adult worldwide provided evidence that obesity is a growing pandemic, with the prevalence of obesity having
65 increased from 3.2% in 1975 to 10.8% in 2014 in men, and from 6.4% to 14.9% in women.² Concerns regarding the
66 health and economic burden of growing obesity rates have led to adiposity being included among the global non-
67 communicable disease (NCD) goals.²

68 Changes in lifestyle related to energy balance, including insufficient levels of physical activity (PA) and higher energy
69 intake have been proposed as the main driving force behind the rise in obesity over recent decades.^{3, 4} The processes
70 of modernization, urbanization and globalisation of eating behaviours have affected dietary intake and PA patterns
71 and have subsequently contributed to the development of obesity.⁵ Thus, a detailed understanding of the behavioural
72 factors associated with obesity is essential for the design and implementation of effective public health interventions
73 aimed to prevent or manage obesity.

74 The present study uses baseline data from the Food4Me study, a pan-European randomized controlled trial, designed
75 to investigate the effect of personalized nutrition (PN) advice on changes in diet and PA after a 6-month intervention.⁶
76 ⁷ Our study aims to identify predictors of obesity in European adults and to investigate to what extent these predictors
77 are independent of other major confounding factors.

78

79 MATERIALS AND METHODS

80 Study population

81 The Food4Me Proof of Principle (PoP) study was a 6-month, internet-based, randomised controlled trial (RCT)
82 conducted across seven countries in Europe (www.food4me.org).^{6, 7} Out of 5,662 individuals who were interest in this
83 trial (mean age 40 (SD: 12.7); range 15-87 years) between August 2012 and August 2013, the first 1,441 volunteers
84 meeting the inclusion criteria and with available data for the analysis were included in the present study. Participants
85 were recruited from the following recruitment sites: Maastricht University (The Netherlands), University College
86 Dublin (Ireland), University of Navarra (Spain), University of Reading (United Kingdom, UK), Harokopio University

87 (Greece), Technical University of Munich (Germany) and National Food and Nutrition Institute (Poland), were included
88 in the study. Participants aged <18 years, pregnant or lactating, with limited access to the Internet, follow a prescribed
89 diet for any reason were excluded from the study. The Research Ethics Committees at each Research Centre granted
90 ethics approval for the study.

91

92 **Study measures**

93 Participants agreed to self-report their measures via the internet. To ensure that procedures were comparable in all
94 recruiting centres, standardised operating procedures were arranged for all measurements.^{6, 7}

95 An online screening questionnaire collected detailed self-reported (SR) information on socio-demographic, dietary,
96 food choices, anthropometric and health-related data. At baseline, anthropometric measures were self-measured and
97 self-reported via the internet. Participants were instructed to measure body weight after an overnight fast, barefoot
98 and wearing light clothing using a commercial or home scale, and to measure height using a measuring tape provided
99 by Food4Me study.^{6, 7} Waist circumference (WC) was measured at the mid-point between the lower rib and the iliac
100 crest. Central obesity was set as WC >102 cm and >88 cm for men and women, respectively. BMI was calculated from
101 body weight divided by height square. The WHO criteria for BMI was used to define nutritional status (underweight
102 <18.5, normal weight ≥ 18.5 to ≤ 24.9 , overweight ≥ 25.0 to ≤ 29.9 and obese ≥ 30.0 kg/m²).⁸ These self-reported
103 measurements were repeated in a random sub-sample of 140 participants who were invited to participate in a
104 validation study, these results are described in supplementary methods and elsewhere.⁹

105 Occupational activities were grouped according to the European classifications a) professional and managerial, b)
106 intermediate, c) routine and manual, d) service and sales workers, e) elementary occupations, f) students and g)
107 retired.¹⁰

108 Objective physical activity levels (PAL= total energy expenditure / basal metabolic rate) and time spent in sedentary-
109 related behaviours (min/day) were assessed using triaxial accelerometers (TracmorD, Philips Consumer Lifestyle, The
110 Netherlands). Participants were instructed to wear the accelerometer every day during waking hours, apart from when
111 taking a shower, for the entire duration of the study. Intensities of PA were derived using thresholds for activity energy
112 expenditure for sedentary behaviours (corresponding to <1.5 METs), light (1.5 to <3 METs), moderate (3 to <6 METs),
113 vigorous (≥ 6 METs) or moderate-equivalent intensity PA.¹¹ Moderate-equivalent PA was derived using the equation
114 [moderate PA + (vigorous PA x 2)]. Individuals who accumulated ≥ 150 minutes of moderate-equivalent PA a week

115 were classified as physically active.¹¹ Additional information on physical activity measure is provided in supplementary
116 material.

117 At baseline, participants completed an online Food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) to estimate usual dietary intake
118 during the last month. This FFQ, was developed for the Food4Me Study^{12, 13} and included 157 food items consumed
119 frequently in each of the seven recruitment countries. The reproducibility and validity of the FFQ was assessed and
120 these details are reported in our Supplementary Methods and elsewhere.^{14, 15} Intakes of foods and nutrients were
121 computed in real time using a food composition database based on McCance & Widdowson's "The composition of
122 foods".¹⁶ Intakes were assessed using a standardized set of recommendations¹⁷ for foods and food groups including
123 fruit and vegetable, wholegrain products, dairy products, oily fish, red meat, processed meat, fats and spreads, fruit
124 juice, sugar sweetened carbonated drinks, sweets and pastries, nut, vegetable oil and olive oil.¹⁷

125 Furthermore, two healthy eating scores were derived to measure the overall diet quality. The first one, adherence to
126 the Mediterranean diet (MD) was estimated based on the PREDIMED 14-point criteria¹⁸ (Supplemental Table 1).
127 FFQs at baseline were used to derive each of the following criteria: higher intake of olive oil than other culinary fat,
128 higher intake of white meat than red meat, high intake of fruit (including natural fruit juice), vegetables, olive oil,
129 legumes, nuts, fish, wine and tomato-based sauces and limited intakes of red and processed meats, fats and
130 spreads, soft drinks and commercial bakery goods, sweets and pastries.¹⁸ Participants scored 1 point for each of the
131 14 criterion they met and 0 for each they did not meet; points were summed to create an overall MD score, ranging
132 from 0-14.¹⁸

133 The second diet quality score was derived using the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), which was updated and validated to
134 reflect the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the accompanying USDA Food Patterns.¹⁹ The HEI-2010
135 includes 12 food groups, 9 of which assessed adequacy of the diet, including 1) total fruit; 2) whole fruit; 3) total
136 vegetables; 4) greens and beans; 5) whole grains; 6) dairy; 7) total protein foods; 8) seafood and plant proteins; and
137 9) fatty acids. The remaining three factors, refined grains, sodium, and empty calories (i.e., energy from solid fats,
138 alcohol, and added sugars), assess dietary components that should be consumed in moderation. Higher scores
139 reflected better diet quality. Scores for each of the 12 items are summed to produce a total score with a maximum
140 value of 100.¹⁹

141 **Statistical analysis**

Multivariate Linear Regression analyses were performed to test for associations between the outcomes (BMI and WC) and the exposures of interest, including age, physical activity and dietary intake. For comparison purposes, all continuous exposures were standardised and presented as standard deviation (SD) units. The odds for overweight and obesity (BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m²) and central obesity (WC > 88 and > 102 cm for women and men, respectively) were estimated by socio-demographics, PA and dietary intake variables. Tertiles for each of these continuous variables were derived using the standardised variables.

Analyses were adjusted incrementally. Model 1 was adjusted for age, sex, country and occupation, whereas Model 2 was additionally adjusted for total time spent in sedentary behaviours and total PA for dietary outcomes, and monitor wearing time and total energy intake for physical activity outcomes. Total energy intake was included in model 2 for PA exposures to elucidate whether the association between PA and our outcomes of interest goes beyond an effect of total energy intake. Data were analysed using Stata (version 14; StataCorp. TX, USA). Results were deemed significant at *P-value* < 0.05 .

154

RESULTS

Cohort characteristics

Of the 1,607 participants randomised into the Food4Me trial, data at baseline on BMI were available for 1,441 participants (58% were women and 97% were Caucasian), characteristics of the drop outs have been described elsewhere ²⁰. As summarised in Table 1, the mean age was 40.1 years (range: 18 to 79), 30% of individuals were overweight and 16% were obese. Although 47% of participants were classified as physically active, 28% of participants recorded less than 1 minute of vigorous intensity PA daily. Dietary intakes of nutrients and food groups and diet quality scores by BMI and WC categories are described in Tables 1 and Table S2.

163

Association of BMI and WC with socio-demographic, dietary and physical activity factors

As presented in Table 2, the main factors associated with higher BMI per 1-SD increase in the exposure or independent variable were age (β :1.11 kg/m²), and intakes of processed meat (β :1.04 kg/m²), red meat (β :1.02 kg/m²), saturated fat (β :0.84 kg/m²), monounsaturated fat (β :0.80 kg/m²), protein (β :0.74 kg/m²), total energy (β :0.50 kg/m²), olive oil (β :0.36 kg/m²), sugar sweetened carbonated drinks (β :0.33 kg/m²) and time spent sedentary

169 (β :0.73 kg/m²). In addition, total sugars intake was negatively associated with WC (β :-1.03 kg/m² per 1-SD increase in
170 total sugars intake).

171

172 The main factors associated with BMI per 1-SD increase in the exposure were moderate-equivalent PA (β :-1.36
173 kg/m²), light PA (β :-0.77 kg/m²), and intakes of wholegrains (β :-1.05 kg/m²), fibre (β :-1.02 kg/m²), fruits and
174 vegetables (β :-0.52 kg/m²), nuts (β :-0.52 kg/m²), polyunsaturated fat (β :-0.50 kg/m²), HEI (β :-0.42 kg/m²), MD score
175 (β :-0.40 kg/m²), oily fish (β :-0.31 kg/m²), dairy products (β :-0.31 kg/m²) and fruit juice (β :-0.25 kg/m²). As
176 summarised in Table 2, these associations were independent of sex, occupation and country (Model 1), as well as
177 total PA, sedentary behaviours, total energy intake and total accelerometer wear time. Similar results were found
178 for WC (Table 3), although the magnitudes of the associations per 1-SD increase in the exposure were stronger than
179 for BMI (Table 2).

180

181 **Correlates of overall and central obesity**

182 Figure 1 describes the odds ratio of being overweight or obese (BMI \geq 25.0 kg/m²) and centrally obese (WC >88 cm
183 for females and >102 cm for males). Participants in the highest tertile for moderate-equivalent PA (highly active)
184 were 80% less likely to have a BMI \geq 25.0 kg/m² compared with those in the lowest tertile (less active). Similarly,
185 younger participants were 71% less likely to have BMI \geq 25.0 kg/m² than older participants (higher tertile). Those
186 participants who were female, students, from Germany and the Netherlands, and those in the lowest tertile for
187 sedentary behaviour, light intensity PA or total PA, were less likely to be overweight or obese compared with their
188 reference group (Figure 1). Similar results, but with stronger effect sizes, were observed when central obesity was
189 used as the outcome (Figure 1).

190

191 When nutrients intake were used as main exposures (Figure 2), participants in the lowest tertile for
192 monounsaturated, saturated and total fats, salt and total energy intake were less likely to have a BMI \geq 25.0 kg/m²
193 than their counterparts in the higher tertile. In contrast, individuals in the lowest tertile for polyunsaturated fat and
194 vegetable oil intake were more likely to have a BMI \geq 25.0 kg/m² compared with participants in the highest tertile
195 (Figure 2 and Table S3). Similarly, central obesity was less likely among those with lowest intakes of protein,
196 carbohydrates, monounsaturated fat, and salt. However, individuals in the lower tertile for sugar intake were more

likely to have central obesity (Figure 2). The odds of having BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m² or central obesity by food group are presented in Figure 3.

Discussion

Our main findings are the associations between intakes of nutrients and of healthy and unhealthy foods as well as healthy eating score with markers of overall and central obesity in adults from seven European countries. Our study found that the strongest positive correlates with adiposity were age and reported intakes of processed meat, red meat or saturated fat (effect size ranging from 1.11 to 0.84 kg/m² per 1-SD increase in the exposure), whereas the strongest negative correlates of adiposity were moderate-equivalent PA, and reported intakes of wholegrain or dietary fibre intake, with effect sizes ranging from -1.36 to -1.02 kg/m² change in BMI and -3.76 to -0.75 cm change in WC per 1-SD increase in these exposures. These observations may have important implications for the design of future studies aiming to reduce body weight or related adiposity outcomes, by focussing on key lifestyle behaviours that are associated with obesity.

Our findings corroborate, and provide new evidence, for associations between PA and obesity outcomes. A recent systematic review that have investigated the association between weight gain with physical activity have reported that physical activity levels that increase the total energy expenditure to > 1.7–1.8 times the basal metabolic rate are needed to decrease obesity risk.^{21, 22} This is in agreement with our finding where the magnitude of the effect of PA on obesity outcomes, especially for WC, was greater with higher intensity levels of physical activity (1 SD increase in light, moderate and vigorous intensity PA was associated with -1.70, -1.96 and -2.63 cm lower WC, respectively). In addition, our results confirm previous findings that time spent in sedentary behaviours is associated with increased body weight and risk of obesity, independent of PA levels.²³

Although unhealthy dietary patterns have been associated with obesity, there is inconsistency in the evidence about the role of specific food groups.²⁴ Our study found that reported intakes of processed and red meat were associated with increased adiposity and obesity risk, independent of other confounding factors including total energy intake, total sugars, sedentary behaviour and physical activity. This is in agreement with previous studies showing that both red meat and processed meat, which have been linked to higher intake of total fat, saturated fat and energy dense food and lower intake of healthy foods such as vegetables, are positively associated with increased risk of obesity.²⁵

224 Our findings shows a strong association between fat intake (total, mono and saturated fats) and obesity risk, which
225 is in agreement with a recent review on the effect of reduced fat intake on body weight, which include data from 32
226 trials (approximately 54,000 participants) and from 25 cohort studies.²⁶ This study reported that eating less fat (diet
227 containing <30% of TE from fat compared with usual diet) reduced mean BMI by -0.5 kg (95% CI: -0.74 to -0.26
228 kg/m²), with greater weight loss resulting from greater fat reductions.²⁶ These finding may have important clinical
229 implications since reduced saturated fat intake is associated with a 17% reduction in the risk of cardiovascular
230 disease.²⁷ Our results are also in agreement with previous studies showing negative associations between intakes of
231 dietary fibre,²⁸ wholegrains²⁹ and fruits and vegetable³⁰ with obesity.

232 Interestingly, total sugar intake was inversely associated with BMI and WC independent of intakes of total energy
233 and of other macronutrients including total fat, as has been reported in the UK Biobank study.³¹ However, intakes of
234 sugar sweetened carbonated drinks were positively associated with BMI, WC and obesity risk. There was a similar
235 positive association between intakes of sweets and pastries and obesity risk. This is in agreement with a systematic
236 review which found that sugar sweetened carbonated drinks and sweets snacking were associated with increased
237 obesity risk.³² The inverse association between sugar intake and obesity may seem counter-intuitive; however, this
238 association may be explained by self-reporting bias, with previous studies suggesting that it may be easier for
239 individuals to report intake of food items (i.e. fizzy drinks, chocolate, etc.) than total sugar intake.³³ The UK's
240 Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition concluded that there is a lack of high quality scientific evidence to draw
241 conclusions on the impact of sugars intake on body weight in adults.³⁴

242 Although we identified associations between adiposity outcomes and intakes of individual macronutrients or food
243 groups, dietary behaviours may be better captured by using an overall estimation of dietary quality, as dietary
244 patterns correlate more strongly with adiposity and the risk of obesity.^{35, 36} Our results agree with previous
245 prospective studies which have reported inverse associations between obesity and overall MD scores.^{35, 37, 38} Such
246 inverse associations have also been reported in most,³⁹⁻⁴³ but not all,⁴⁴ cross-sectional studies. However, our study
247 have found that olive oil consumption, an essential component of the Mediterranean diet, was associated with
248 higher adiposity levels whereas a lower vegetable oil intake was associated a lower risk for obesity. The HEI has been
249 inversely associated with the likelihood of being overweight or obesity.⁴⁵

250

251 **Strengths and limitations**

252 We have collected data from adults aged 18-79 years resident in seven European countries. Just 44.8% of
253 participants had a BMI >25 kg/m² which is broadly similar to that of European adults.⁴⁶ However, our recruitment
254 strategy was not designed specifically to yield a sample that is necessarily representative of the European adult
255 population,⁴⁷ and so that findings with respect to the European population as a whole should be interpreted
256 cautiously. Physical activity data were collected objectively using a triaxial accelerometer which is likely to provide a
257 better estimation of the true relationship with obesity than use of self-report instruments. A potential limitation of
258 the study is that the majority of our data were collected by self-report via the internet, which could have introduced
259 recall bias and measurement error.⁴⁸ Although, the precision self-reported anthropometric data collected via the
260 internet is high⁴⁹ we cannot rule out a potential dilution bias due under-reporting of BMI, especially by those who
261 were obese. The current study used cross-sectional data, which cannot provide evidence of causal relationships
262 between dietary patterns or other behavioural factors and obesity outcomes.

263

264 In conclusion, healthy diet scores such as MD and HEI as well as food groups, nutrients and physical activity related
265 behaviours were robustly associated with BMI and WC in adults from seven European countries. Our results show that
266 higher levels of PA and higher diet quality attenuate, while more time spent in sedentary behaviours and higher
267 consumption of processed meat, red meat and fats accentuate associations with BMI and WC. These findings are
268 relevant for public health and suggest that promotion of increased PA, reduced sedentary behaviours and improved
269 overall quality of dietary patterns is a key strategy for addressing the existing obesity epidemic and associated disease
270 burden.

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275

276 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

277 The authors declare no conflict of interest.

278

279 **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION**

280 Author responsibilities were as follows: CCM, KML, AA, JCM performed the statistical analysis and wrote the
281 manuscript. YM, IT, CAD, ERG, LB, JAL, JAM, WHS, HD, MG and JCM contributed to the research design. JCM was the
282 Food4Me Proof of Principle study leader. CCM, CFMM, HF, CBO, CW, ALM, RF, SNC, RSC, CPL, MG, MCW, ERG, LB
283 and JCM contributed to the developing the Standardized Operating Procedures for the study. CCM, SNC, RSC, CW,
284 CBO, HF, CFMM, AM, RF, CPL, MG, IT, MCW and JCM conducted the intervention. CCM, CFMM and WHS contributed
285 to physical activity measurements.

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481 **Figures Legends**

482 **Figure 1. Odds ratios for overall and central obesity by socio-demographic and physical activity**

483 Data presented as adjusted odds ratio and 95% CI. Models were adjusted for age, sex, country and occupation.
484 Physical activity-related exposures were additionally adjusted for total energy intake and wearing time. Physical
485 activity related variables are presented as tertiles. The lowest tertile (Least active) was used as the reference group,
486 except for sedentary behaviour where the highest tertile was used as the reference category. Overweight or obesity
487 was defined as BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m² and central obesity was defined as waist circumference >88 cm for females and
488 >102 cm for males. PA: physical activity.

489

490 **Figure 2. Odds ratios for overall and central obesity by tertile of nutrients intake**

491 Data presented as adjusted odds ratio and 95% CI. Models were adjusted for age, sex, country and occupation.
492 Dietary fibre and salt were additionally adjusted for total energy intake. All exposures are presented as tertile. The
493 highest tertile (highest intake) was used as reference group, except for dietary fibre, where the lowest tertile (lowest
494 intake) was used as reference group. Overweight or obesity was defined as BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m² and central obesity was
495 defined as waist circumference >88 cm for females and >102 cm for males.

496

497 **Figure 3. Odds ratios for overall and central obesity by tertile of food groups and diet quality score**

498 Data presented as adjusted odds ratio and 95% CI. Models were adjusted for age, sex, country, occupation and total
499 energy intake. All exposures are presented as tertiles. Overweight or obesity was defined as BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m² and
500 central obesity was defined as waist circumference >88 cm for females and >102 cm for males.