



One in eight people are now living with obesity

1 March 2024 - A new study released by the Lancet shows that, in 2022, more than 1 billion people in the world are now living with obesity. Worldwide, obesity among adults has more than doubled since 1990, and has quadrupled among children and adolescents (5 to 19 years of age). The data also show that 43% of adults were overweight in 2022.

The study also shows that even though the rates of undernutrition have dropped, it is still a public health challenge in many places, particularly in South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Countries with the highest combined rates of underweight and obesity in 2022 were island nations in the Pacific and the Caribbean and those in the Middle East and North Africa.

Malnutrition, in all its forms, includes undernutrition (wasting, stunting, underweight), inadequate vitamins or minerals, overweight and obesity. Undernutrition is responsible for half of the deaths of children under 5 and obesity can cause noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and some cancers.

WHO has contributed to the data collection and analysis of this study. The full dataset is now also disseminated through the Global Health Observatory.

“This new study highlights the importance of preventing and managing obesity from early life to adulthood, through diet, physical activity, and adequate care, as needed,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “Getting back on track to meet the global targets for curbing obesity will take the work of governments and communities, supported by evidence-based policies from WHO and national public health agencies. Importantly, it requires the cooperation of the private sector, which must be accountable for the health impacts of their products”.

Obesity is a complex chronic disease. The causes are well understood, as are the interventions needed to contain the crisis, which are backed by strong evidence. However, they are not implemented. At the World Health Assembly in 2022 Member States adopted the WHO Acceleration plan to stop obesity, which supports country-level action through 2030. To date, 31 governments are now leading the way to curb the obesity epidemic by implementing the plan.

The core interventions are: I) actions to support healthy practices from day 1, including breastfeeding promotion, protection and support; II) regulations on the harmful marketing of food and beverages to children; III) school food and nutrition policies, including initiatives to regulate the sales of products high in fats, sugars and salt in proximity of schools; IV) fiscal and pricing policies to promote healthy diets; V) nutrition labelling policies; VI)

public education and awareness campaigns for healthy diets and exercise; VII) standards for physical activity in schools; and VIII) integration of obesity prevention and management services into primary health care.

“There are significant challenges in implementing policies aimed at ensuring affordable access to healthy diets for all and creating environments that promote physical activity and overall healthy lifestyles for everyone,” stated Dr Francesco Branca, Director of WHO’s Nutrition and Food Safety Department and one of the co-authors of the study. “Countries should also ensure that health systems integrate the prevention and management of obesity into the basic package of services.”

Addressing undernutrition requires multisectoral action in agriculture, social protection and health, to reduce food insecurity, improve access to clean water and sanitation and ensure universal access to essential nutrition interventions.

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