

# New WHO data on childhood obesity in Kazakhstan: higher physical activity levels but more screen time



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Relative to other countries in the WHO European Region, Kazakhstan has low levels of childhood overweight and obesity. However, recent WHO surveillance data show that these levels may be increasing, especially among boys. This new finding formed the basis of the new factsheet “Results of surveillance of childhood obesity, nutrition and physical activity 2020”, prepared by WHO and Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Health.

According to the latest WHO data, 21% of children aged 6–9 years in Kazakhstan are living with overweight or obesity.

For 8-year-old girls, this rate is around 18%, and has remained almost stable since 2015. For boys, the trend is more worrying. From 2015 until 2020, overweight and obesity levels among 8-year-old boys increased by more than 5%, reaching 24%.

“In Kazakhstan, we can see a gradual shift towards consumption of more sugary drinks and more sedentary leisure time spent with gadgets. But at the same time, we see more positive trends. Prevalence of daily physical activity (60 minutes and above) has increased by more than 15% and reached 86%,” explained Dr Zhanar Kalmakova, acting Board Chair at the National Center of Public Health of the Ministry of Health.

Overweight and obesity among school-aged children are major challenges in the WHO European Region. Even after childhood, these conditions are major risk factors for developing several noncommunicable diseases, including cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes.

According to data from the same study, around 5% of children in Kazakhstan are thin, which can also lead to health problems later in life.

“There is an old saying, ‘We value what we measure’,” said Dr Caroline Clarinval, WHO Representative to Kazakhstan. “When we measure childhood obesity, we are better equipped to ensure that we are giving our children a healthy future. The results from this survey show that levels of overweight and obesity in Kazakhstan are low, relative to levels in other parts of the Region. But they also indicate that there are areas where we need to remain vigilant, including children’s exposure to screen time, to ensure that levels of overweight and obesity do not rise to the levels we see in other parts of the Region.”

Dr Clarinval added, “One of the strengths of the WHO European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) is that it enables decision-makers to examine the factors that have an influence on weight: from gender and dietary behaviours to geographical differences to multiple social factors that indirectly impact obesity and overweight issues.”

For instance, the WHO data show that parents in Kazakhstan tend to under-evaluate the weight of their children. Parents of 77.6% of surveyed children with overweight or obesity stated that their children fell into an average weight category. As parents play an important role in developing dietary patterns and exercise habits for their children, this challenge should be considered when developing an effective policy approach.

The new data come from the nationwide survey carried out jointly in 2020 by Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Health (through its National Center for Public Health) and COSI, and with support from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

Special consideration should be given to the ways that socioeconomic factors may influence obesity risk. Efforts must be made to ensure that everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, has access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity.

The recommendations reflect the core principles of the European Programme of Work 2020–2025, which appeals to Member States for united action to eliminate health inequities and strive for better well-

being across the WHO European Region.

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