

Obesity causes cancer and is major determinant of disability and death, warns new WHO report



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Almost two thirds of adults and 1 in 3 children in the WHO European Region are living with overweight or obesity, and these rates are still growing. The new WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022 warns of the serious health risks associated with rising levels of obesity. Obesity is among the top determinants of death and disability in the Region, the condition is a cause of 13 different types of cancer, and it needs to be treated and managed by multidisciplinary teams.

“Obesity knows no borders. In Europe and Central Asia, no single country is going to meet the WHO Global NCD target of halting the rise of obesity,” said Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe. “The countries in our Region are incredibly diverse, but every one is challenged to some degree. By creating environments that are more enabling, promoting investment and innovation in health, and developing strong and resilient health systems, we can change the trajectory of obesity in the Region.”

Overweight and obesity rank fourth as a risk factor for death, after high blood pressure, dietary risks and tobacco. Obesity is a complex multifactorial disease that presents a risk to health. It is associated with many noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) including cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and cancer.

For some countries in the European Region, it is predicted that in the coming decades obesity will overtake smoking as the main risk factor for preventable cancer.

The report also highlights that obesity is a condition, not just a risk factor, that needs to be specifically treated and managed.

According to the report, obesity prevalence for adults in the European Region is higher than in any other WHO region except the Region of

the Americas. The latest data shows that overweight and obesity account for more than 1.3 million deaths globally each year, but even these numbers may be underestimated.

In the European Region, overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions, with prevalence levels higher among males (63%) than among females (54%). The rates tend to be higher in countries with higher incomes.

The highest levels of both overweight and obesity are found in Mediterranean and eastern European countries. Educational inequalities are widespread, with higher obesity prevalence found in people with lower educational attainment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the obesity problem even more pressing. Patients with obesity are more likely to experience complications and death from the virus, and many of these patients have experienced disruptions in accessing obesity management services.

Preliminary data also suggest that during the current pandemic, people have had higher exposure to obesity risk factors, including an increase in sedentary lifestyles and consumption of unhealthy foods.

“Obesity is influenced by the environment, so it is important to look at this problem from the perspective of every stage of life. For example, the life of children and adolescents is impacted by digital environments, including marketing of unhealthy food and drinks,” said Dr Kremlin Wickramasinghe, Acting Head of the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of NCDs, which produced the WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022.

“We have learned over time that a single policy will not work. To succeed as a country or Region, we need a comprehensive package of interventions. No single country has been able to introduce all these policies at the same time. It is important to prioritise 2 or 3 policies to implement now and have a feasible plan to introduce the rest of the interventions,” added Dr Wickramasinghe. “Restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children, taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages and improving health system response for obesity management are currently among the most actively discussed policy areas in the WHO European Region.”

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