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In body-conscious Brazil, half are now overweight

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One of the world's most body-conscious countries, Brazil is now threatened by growing obesity rates, with half of the population already overweight.

As a result of an unbalanced diet and a rise in more sedentary lifestyles, Brazil, which moved 30 million people out of poverty and into the middle class over the past decade, is paying a heavy price for its frenetic growth.

Official statistics corroborate the alarming rise in the number of overweight or obese people in the world's sixth largest economy.

Nearly half of the country's 194 million people are overweight and 16 percent obese, according to a health ministry report released in April.

The percentage of overweight people jumped from 42.7% in 2006 to 48.5% in 2011, while the obesity rate increased from 11.4% to 15.8% in the same period.

The most overweight section of the population are men aged 35-45, of whom almost two thirds are fat, and women aged 45-54.

"It is high time to reverse the trend so as to avoid becoming like the United States, where nearly 35.7 percent of the adult population is obese," Health Minister Alexandre Padilha warned.

"Brazilians have a poor diet. They could eat green vegetables but they prefer beans and fat," said Solange de Goncalves, a 38-year-old from Rio who weighs 123 kilos (271 pounds) and is among Brazil's 30 million obese citizens.

Overweight since her childhood, she also suffers from high blood pressure and diabetes and concedes that her life is not easy.

"People look at you in the street. You cannot find clothes matching your size. Once I even got stuck in a bus turnstile," she told AFP, her voice cracking with emotion.

Goncalves is envious of the celebrities who make headlines or star in telenovelas, like Suede Junior, a male model sporting a "Made in Brazil" tattoo on his chest.

"To go to the gym, take good care of one's body is something common in Rio," he told AFP on Ipanema beach.

After a 12-year wait, Goncalves had a gastric ring inserted in July, a procedure covered by her public health insurance.

"I am happy. I already lost 15 of the 50 kilograms I want to lose," she said.

With the operation, which reduces the size of the stomach, a patient can lose 80 percent of his excess weight but must be monitored by a surgeon, an endocrinologist, a psychologist and a nutritionist for the rest of his life.

"The key to a successful treatment is dieting. The surgery is meant to help the patient, but if he drops the diet, he will regain weight," explained Octavio Falcao, a specialist who carries out the surgery.

The number of Brazilians undergoing the ring procedure soared 275 percent between 2003 and 2010 to 60,000 a year.

After enduring 10 years of obesity, Jederson Edealdo das Dores finally decided to undergo the 45-minute operation by coelioscopy, the most common procedure used by private doctors.

"I used to be thin. I want to be normal again," said Dores.

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