

Venezuela battles obesity amid dearth of good food

August 27 2014, by Joshua Goodman



Mannequins stand at a store that sells clothing for over weight people in downtown Caracas, Venezuela, Tuesday, Aug. 26, 2014. The Venezuelan government has launched a public relations campaign to halt a steady rise in obesity that, if left unchecked, threatens to lead to a costly, public health crisis. (AP Photo/Fernando Llano)

Venezuela's socialist government is sounding the alarm about growing waistlines in a country where record food shortages are making it harder to put healthy meals on the table, prompting many people to fill up on

empty calories.

Authorities launched a public relations campaign Tuesday to halt a steady rise in obesity that threatens to lead to a costly, public health crisis if left unchecked.

Under the slogan "Get informed, eat healthy" President Nicolas Maduro's government hopes over the next five years to cut in half the nearly 40 percent rate of obesity among Venezuelans, a condition putting them at greater risk of heart disease and diabetes.

According to the World Health Organization, 67.5 percent of Venezuelans over age 20 are overweight, more than in any country in South America and nearly equal to the 69 percent rate in the United States.

The battle against the bulge comes as most Venezuelans complain they can't find enough to eat.

Rigid price controls and a shortage of U.S. dollars make it difficult for even the country's largest food company, Empresas Polar SA, to import needed supplies and turn a profit. As a result, everything from corn flour to milk is in short supply in the oil-rich nation. When staples do suddenly appear in supermarkets, hours-long lines generally follow.

To combat the shortages, the government last week unveiled plans to install fingerprint scanners at grocery stores nationwide. Opponents blasted the plan as a form of Cuban-styled rationing, though the government says the extra controls are needed to stop hoarding and smuggling.

"The fingerprint scan is going to restore freedom because it will help us find and capture the smugglers," Maduro said in a speech Tuesday in

which he held out his family's grocery list when he was a child—two cartons of milk, three packages of corn flour—as an example of rational consumption for Venezuelan households to follow.

To safeguard domestic food supplies, the government Tuesday also announced it was banning the export of 21 food items, including sugar, tuna and rice.



People walk in front of a shopping center that sells clothing for over weight people in downtown Caracas, Venezuela, Tuesday, Aug. 26, 2014. Venezuela's socialist government is sounding the alarm about growing waistlines in a country where record food shortages are making it harder to put healthy meals on the table, prompting many people to fill up on empty calories. (AP Photo/Fernando Llano)

Far from limiting calorie intake, scarcity is one of the main culprits

behind the country's growing girth, nutritionists say.

With balanced meals harder to come by and 60 percent inflation burning a hole through Venezuelans' pockets, many eat an excess of fried foods and goods made with flour to fill up. It's not just traditional temptations like pork rinds or corn-patty arepas stuffed with greasy cheese; despite the government's frequent criticism of the United States "empire," McDonald's fast food is as popular as ever.

"People are eating but they're not getting nourished," says Nixa Martinez, president of the National Association of Nutritionists and Dietitians. "You eat what you can find and what you find isn't healthy."

The government argues that nation's nutrition has improved over the past 15 years as poverty has fallen and price controls have allowed more Venezuelans to afford three meals a day. Last year, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization heaped praise on Venezuela for reducing by half the number of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

But most of the data on Venezuelans' waistline is based on a National Institute of Nutrition study from 2008, Martinez said.

"Since then, Venezuelans' eating habits have changed dramatically," she said.

If the current health kick is to succeed, it might want to start at the top.

Maduro frequently urges Venezuelans to get plenty of exercise, pointing out that a love of [fast food](#) is one of the few things government supporters and opponents have in common in this deeply polarized nation. But he's not known to practice what he preaches.

His mentor and predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez, used to publicly poke fun at the former bus driver's thick torso, saying it was the result of too many submarine sandwiches.

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