

More Africans at risk of chronic illness: WHO

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City life and its modern trappings have brought bad habits to developing African nations that will see more die of chronic illness than infectious diseases by 2030, a study showed Tuesday.

A World Health Organization (WHO) survey of 33 countries has shown that most adults in Africa have at least one risk factor increasing their chance of developing deadly lifestyle diseases such as heart [disease](#), cancer and diabetes.

These include smoking, harmful use of alcohol, a poor diet which does not include the recommended five servings of fruit and vegetables a day, and low levels of physical activity.

Report author Abdikamal Alislad told AFP that the level of [unhealthy habits](#) in many African nations had come as a shock.

"We were surprised because we thought we would not see this kind of situation currently. We were expecting it maybe 30 or 40 years from now," he said.

Particularly disturbing was the fact that an estimated 46 percent of Africans suffer high blood pressure—the highest worldwide.

He attributes the rise in [non-communicable diseases](#) to changes in developing societies.

"People are moving from the rural areas, going to urban, metropolitan areas. The middle-income group is growing, life expectancy is also growing."

While the tobacco, alcohol and food industries have had to adapt to growing health-consciousness in the West, this is not the case in Africa.

The WHO study found that daily tobacco use ranges from five to 26 percent in Africa, and is only growing. Cigarettes are often a fraction of the price in Africa than in Europe.

"They see Africa as a fertile ground because of the legislation and policy weaknesses that exist in our region, they see opportunity to make a lot of profit," said Alisalad.

"We found out that in some of our countries the alcohol industry is the one who is doing the alcohol policy. It's absurd."

Most people were not eating enough fruits and vegetables, and a rise of junk food and unhealthy diets meant that, paradoxically, sub-Saharan Africa suffered from the double burden of under nutrition and obesity.

The survey showed an average of 35 percent of people were overweight and that the average time spent in moderate or high intensity [physical activity](#) ranged from 21 minutes per day in Mauritania to 386 minutes per day in Mozambique.

Women were more likely to be inactive and overweight.

The report showed that some four million people will die from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Africa by 2020, and the figure will surpass those of [infectious diseases](#) by 2030.

"We are still struggling with communicable diseases ... but now you see with the number of people that require screening, counselling and treatment for chronic non-communicable disease, our health system can't cope," said Alisalad.

"Government should raise domestic financing mechanisms so they can accommodate this growing burden. The whole health system should be reorganised or reoriented."

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