

Urban women at 'higher risk of chronic disease'

November 30 2020



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African women who live in cities are 7% more likely to have chronic diseases than rural dwellers.

Africa's booming urban population is increasingly vulnerable to chronic diseases, with women at greatest risk of obesity-related illnesses, a study

of cities and [health](#) has found.

The United Nations estimates that 68% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2050, with almost 90% of this increase taking place in Asia and Africa.

Commenting on the findings, Fredrick Mashili, a healthy living advocate and lecturer at the Department of Physiology at Tanzania's Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, says that the built environment is now widely accepted as a factor that encourages healthy living as well as a health risk.

"In our set-up, being overweight and obese are still linked to high social economic status. People with overweight or obesity [are believed to] have no financial challenges. In this case, these people probably need proper education on healthy living and a proper built environment," he says.

"Stress and other challenges related to urban life still contribute to obesity among urban dwellers, in addition to sedentary lifestyles, motorized transportation and office jobs that keep people sitting in one place for a long time," explains Mashili, who was not involved in the study.

The researchers measured the risk of chronic disease among women in Tanzania by using a marker of heart-related disease risk called C-reactive protein and body mass index was used to measure obesity.

Researchers analyzed data on 2,212 women from the country's 2010 demographic and health survey with a focus on indicators of chronic diseases.

According to the study published in *PLOS One* this month (3 November),

about 27% of women living in cities had an increased risk of chronic disease compared with about 21% of women in rural communities. The proportion of urban women who were obese or overweight was 37%, compared with 17.6% of the rural population.

"Of interest to policymakers will be our findings that urban women may be worse off on two indicators of chronic disease risk, suggesting further study and perhaps improved public health messaging and health services in urban areas regarding how to reduce risk of cardiovascular disease and obesity," says the study's lead author Jessie Pinchoff, an associate at the US-based Population Council.

Chronic diseases, such as asthma, diabetes and cancer, require long-term treatment. Pinchoff says that studying the impact of urbanicity on chronic diseases is a challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa.

"Few nationally representative datasets are available on chronic diseases in Sub-Saharan Africa," she tells SciDev.Net.

The researchers say the demographic and health survey they analyzed had relevant heart [disease](#) data only for [women](#), and more such research involving men in Sub-Saharan Africa is urgently needed.

This piece was produced by SciDev.Net's Sub-Saharan Africa English desk.

More information: Jessie Pinchoff et al. Urbanization and health: The effects of the built environment on chronic disease risk factors among women in Tanzania, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0241810](#)

Provided by SciDev.Net

Citation: Urban women at 'higher risk of chronic disease' (2020, November 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

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