

Africa urged to act fast to combat obesity surge

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Urgent measures such as taxes and restrictions on sugary foods and drinks are needed to stem the rising trend of obesity in Africa. Credit: photosforyou from Pixabay

Urgent measures such as taxes and restrictions on sugary foods and drinks are needed to stem the rising trend of obesity in Africa, the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned.

One in five adults and one in ten children and teenagers are projected to become obese by December 2023 in ten high-burden African countries including Algeria, Eswatini, Gabon, Libya, Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe, according to new analysis by the WHO.

Using data from 2018, the analysis estimates that prevalence among adults in the ten high-burden African countries will range from 13.6 to 31 percent, while in children and adolescents it will range from five to 16.5 percent.

"Obesity is a huge health problem in Africa and we need to understand that. Unfortunately, many do not think about it," says Hana Bekele, acting regional nutrition advisor for the WHO Regional Office for Africa.

According to the WHO nutritionist, the rising cases are a result of a growing number of middle-class Africans preferring high-energy processed food rich in sugars and fats to eating [fresh food](#).

Lack of [physical activity](#) in cities and changing modes of transport in many countries are also significantly associated with rising cases of obesity.

"To fight overweight and obesity, there is need to go back to traditional grandma's recipe. That entails eating vegetables, legumes, nuts, freshly cut fruit and the likes," Bekele says.

The WHO is urging governments to prioritize a range of measures including mandatory limits on food sugar content, taxes on [sugary drinks](#), and food marketing regulations such as obligatory nutrient information.

"We need to work closely with the [food industry](#) to reduce fats and sugar concentrations in processed foods, make [healthy choices](#) available for

consumers," adds Bekele.

"Mandatory front pack food labeling for content of [food](#) items people buy is critical. The development and implementation of regulatory standards and fiscal measures to promote healthy diets and physical activity like is currently being done in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda is important.

"Everyone has a role to play in the consumption of processed foods. For instance, what we pack for our children when going to school. Sugar is addictive and has become routine in our diets despite the negative health consequences.

Urban planning to include safe recreational spaces is also vital, says Bekele, noting that individuals should exercise for between 60 and 150 minutes a day as one of the measures to ward off obesity.

She adds that regular data collection on obesity cases on the continent is crucial: "We need to know factors that trigger overweight and obesity for designing of necessary interventions."

Zipporah Bukania, deputy director of the Kenya Medical Research Institute, says that overweight and obesity affect individual health, society and the health system.

"Overweight often leads to obesity, which is associated with increased susceptibility to non-communicable conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and cancer, osteoarthritis (a breakdown of cartilage and bone within a joint) as well as breathing problems," she tells SciDev.Net.

She explains that for children, overweight and obesity affect self-esteem, inherently impacting negatively on [school performance](#) as well as increasing risk of noncommunicable diseases at an early age.

"Increased disease in society translates into high healthcare costs at family level and for the healthcare system," explains Bukania, who has expertise in applied human nutrition and nutrition policy.

She says action is urgently needed to implement strategies such as policies on marketing of unhealthy foods, planning to include facilities for exercise, walkways and playing fields in schools.

Provided by SciDev.Net

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