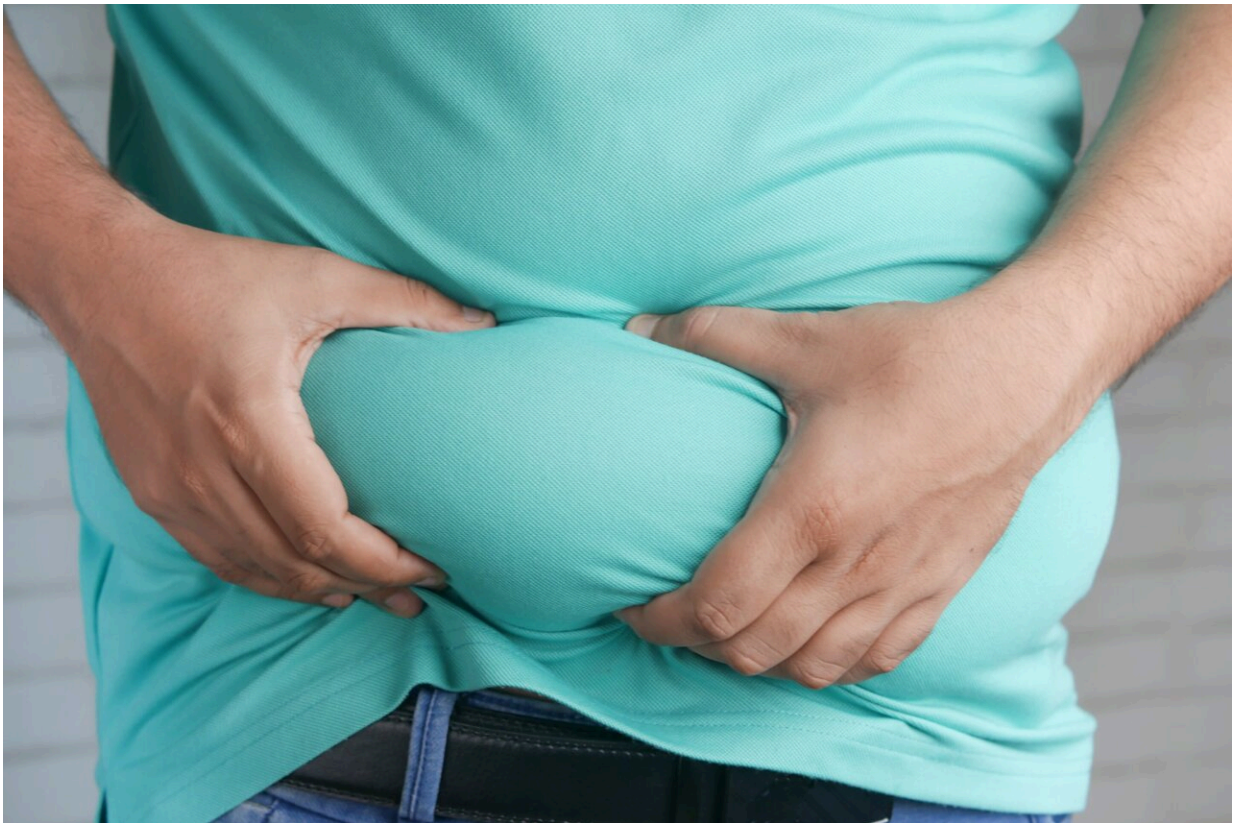


# Obesity levels will rise to more than half of the world's population by 2035, report warns

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A new report by the World Obesity Federation (WOF) has said more than half of the world's population will be obese or overweight by 2035 if significant action isn't taken. The federation's 2023 atlas also

predicted that childhood obesity levels could more than double over the next 12 years to around 208 million boys and 175 million girls.

Associate Professor in Nutrition at Kingston University Dr. Hilda Mulrooney explains her thoughts on the report's findings and what measures should be taken to stop [obesity](#) levels rising.

The estimated increase in [obesity prevalence](#) in adults and children worldwide is shocking, but not surprising. In 2007, the UK Foresight report estimated that by 2050, 60% of [adult males](#) and 50% of [adult females](#) could be living with obesity if action were not taken (Butland et al, 2007). These latest findings by the World Obesity Federation are global. They highlight that no nation has seen a decline in obesity prevalence, and that the increase in prevalence will be more severe in children than adults. This is worrying, since children living with excess weight who remain so as adults are exposed to the negative consequences of obesity for a longer proportion of their lifespan.

It is also of concern that the projected increases are higher in low-income countries, which do not have the resources to support people through [health promotion](#), or obesity prevention, diagnosis or treatment.

## **Benefits of sugar tax and calls for more to be done**

WOF identify the importance of a coordinated response, with high level support, adequately resourced for equitable prevention as well as treatment. Robust response to the marketing of high fat, salt and [sugary foods](#) and drinks, and the use of tools such as taxing [unhealthy foods](#) and drinks are needed. In the U.K., the tax on sugar sweetened drinks resulted in significantly more sugar being removed from the drinks by manufacturers than voluntary action to reduce sugar content of foods did. It cannot be right that global food and drink manufacturers can promote unhealthy foods and drinks in [low-income countries](#) with

impunity—food chains are global so mandatory action to improve foods and drinks should be too.

## **Impact of obesity on other health conditions**

Obesity is not just a multifactorial, complex relapsing disease with strong genetic components, it is also a marker of inequality. The pandemic showed clearly that overweight and obesity impacted on acute as well as chronic health—those with obesity were identified early on as a key risk group for severe COVID-19 outcomes. Actions taken during the pandemic to protect people from infection frequently resulted in weight gain due to changes to what and how much was eaten, as well as activity levels.

## **Cost-of-living crisis worsening issues**

It has been evident for a long time that obesity is not evenly spread throughout the population but is higher in low income than high income groups. This is starkly illustrated in the WOF estimates. The current cost-of-living crisis has the potential to make this problem worse—those struggling to manage on low incomes have to reduce their food budget since they cannot reduce their fixed costs. In reality, that usually means relying on cheaper, filling foods which are less healthy.

## **Education and exercise key to prevention**

We have to think for the long-term and we have to think prevention. We need to start at the beginning with active promotion of breastfeeding, but we also need to equip children with practical life skills like cooking, shopping and healthy eating on a budget. These should be a fundamental part of the education system throughout the school years. They are skills so they have to be practiced; we don't learn to drive by watching people

drive. We will not embed these coping life skills in our children unless we allow them into kitchens to develop them, as part of their education, so that children who are not learning to cook at home, learn to cook at school.

At the same time, [physical movement](#) and activity should be built into the school day, and the [food](#) environment should be better protected—by restricting marketing and promotions of high fat, salt and sugar foods and drinks. We also need to better support those already living with overweight and obesity, addressing weight-related stigma and ensuring that care is appropriate, tailored and equitable.

**More information:** World Obesity Federation's 2023 Atlas report: [www.worldobesityday.org/resources/2023-atlas-report](http://www.worldobesityday.org/resources/2023-atlas-report)

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