

'Western' diseases spread to developing world: experts

October 13 2010, by Yannick Pasquet

Chronic illnesses like obesity and diabetes, generally seen as "Western", are making worryingly rapid inroads in the developing world, health experts warned at a meeting in Berlin this week.

Around 80 percent of new cases of cancers, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases are now being recorded not in the rich West, but in poorer parts of the globe, according to World Health Organisation (WHO) figures.

The explosion is a "consequence of importing lifestyles from Western countries," Francis Collins, head of the US-based National Institutes of Health, told the World Health Summit at Berlin's Charite hospital.

According to the WHO, the worst-affected areas are southeast Asia and the western Pacific, while the Middle East stands out for swelling rates of obesity.

"An [obesity epidemic](#) is inevitable unless policies to reduce intakes substantially from fat and sugar with spontaneous increases in activity are introduced now," said Philip James, chairman of the British-based International Obesity Task Force (IOTF).

Currently, there are around 300 million people around the world classified as obese, with a [body mass index](#) (BMI) -- a measure computing body weight and height -- of over 30, according to the IOTF.

The rise in the [developing world](#) is all the more surprising because these

countries are also ravaged by hunger, but the increase in obesity does not necessarily mean that people there are becoming better fed. Obesity often masks underlying deficiencies in vitamins and minerals, the IOTF says.

As these countries develop economically, people's diets change as more and more of them move to cities and eat high-fat and high-sugar foods, often in Western-style fast food eateries. Urban life also tends to be more sedentary.

As a result, people put on weight, making them more susceptible to [chronic illness](#) including diabetes, heart disease and cancer, adding to the strain on already overstretched health care systems.

In India, for example, rates of diabetes are twice as high in urban centres than in rural areas, James said.

According to the WHO, 90 percent of sufferers have Type 2 diabetes -- when the body cannot effectively use the insulin it makes -- largely as a result of excess body weight and physical inactivity.

Diabetes sufferers are expected to number 300 million in 2025, up from 135 million in 1995, the WHO predicts. Deaths will double between 2005 and 2030.

In 2005, an estimated 1.1 million people died from diabetes, with almost 80 percent of deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries, the WHO said.

But many experts say that the international community has not yet taken on board the growth of chronic diseases in the developing world.

Instead, particularly in Africa, efforts are focused on fighting contagious

diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS, which are also mass killers.

"From a medical point of view, they are preventable," said Pekka Puska, director general of the National Institute for Health and Welfare in Finland (THL).

"We need to elevate health to a cabinet issue. We need to put this on the agenda of heads of state," said Olivier Raynaud, responsible for health issues at the World Economic Forum.

Berlin's three-day World Health Summit, gathering around 1,000 health experts from around the world, wraps up on Wednesday.

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