

## *Quick facts*

- In 2008, 1.5 billion adults were overweight (BMI  $\geq 25$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>). Of these over 200 million men and nearly 300 million women were obese (BMI  $\geq 30$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>).
- Globally obesity rates have more than doubled since 1980 from 5% to 10% in men and 8% to 14% in women.
- At least 2.8 million people die each year globally, as a result of being overweight or obese.
- Nearly 40 million children under the age of five were overweight in 2010, worldwide.
- In the South-East Asia Region, 300 000 die of overweight/obesity.
- The prevalence of overweight in countries across the Region ranges from 7.6% in male adults in Bangladesh to 53% female adults in Maldives.

## What is overweight/obesity?

Overweight and obesity mean "abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health". For adults, overweight and obesity ranges are determined by using weight and height to calculate the "body mass index" (BMI; weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters (kg/m<sup>2</sup>)).

The WHO defines a BMI *equal to or greater than 25* as **overweight** category and a BMI *equal to or greater than 30* as **obesity**.

### **Childhood obesity**

Children in low- and middle-income countries are more vulnerable to undernutrition. At the same time, they are exposed to high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt, energy-dense, micronutrient-poor foods, which tend to be lower in cost. These dietary patterns in conjunction with low levels of physical activity, result in sharp increases in childhood obesity while undernutrition issues remain unsolved.

## What causes overweight and obesity?

Overweight and obesity result from an energy imbalance due to eating too many calories and not doing enough physical activity to use up the calories. This change in dietary and physical activity patterns have resulted from environmental and societal changes associated with development and lack of supportive policies in sectors such as health, agriculture, transport, urban planning, environment, food processing, distribution, marketing and education.

Globally and regionally, there has been:

- an increased intake of energy-dense foods that are high in fat, salt and sugars but low in vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients; and
- a decrease in physical activity, particularly in urban areas due to the increasingly sedentary nature of many forms of work, changing modes of transportation and increasing urbanization.



*44% of the diabetes burden, 23% of the ischaemic heart disease burden and 7%-41% of certain cancer burdens are attributable to overweight and obesity.*

## What are common consequences of overweight and obesity for NCDs?

Raised BMI is a major risk factor for major noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as:

- cardiovascular diseases (mainly heart disease and stroke);
- diabetes;
- some cancers (endometrial, breast, and colon).

Childhood obesity is associated with a higher chance of obesity, premature death and disability in adulthood. But in addition to increased future risks, obese children experience breathing difficulties, increased risk of fractures, hypertension, early markers of cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance and psychological effects.

## What can be done to stall the obesity epidemic?

Overweight and obesity, as well as their related NCDs, are largely preventable. Supportive environments and communities are fundamental in shaping people's choices, making the healthier choice of foods and regular physical activity the easiest choice, and therefore preventing obesity.

### What individuals can do?

- Eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer foods high in sugars, salts and saturated fats.
- Include more legumes, whole grains and nuts in the diet.
- Limit the intake of sugar and salt consumption from all sources; don't eat junk food.
- Limit energy intake from total fats and shift fat consumption away from saturated fats to unsaturated fats.
- Drink more water instead of sugary drinks.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Engage in regular physical activity (do at least 30 minutes of regular, moderate-intensity activity on most days).
- Limit TV watching in kids.

### What communities can do?

- Create and maintain safe neighbourhoods for physical activity and improve access to parks and playgrounds.
- Advocate for quality physical education in schools and childcare facilities.
- Support breastfeeding programmes.

### What the private sector can do?

- Voluntarily reduce the sugar, salt and fat content of processed foods.
- Ensure that healthy and nutritious choices are available and affordable to all consumers.
- Avoid marketing of junk food, particularly to children.
- Ensure the availability of healthy food choices and support regular physical activity practice in the workplace.

### What governments can do?

- Create public awareness about diet and physical activity through mass media and other means.
- Tax unhealthy foods and subsidize locally produced fruits and vegetables.
- Promote healthy policies and create an environment for walking, bicycling, sports and other physical activities.
- Enforce regulations for ensuring healthy diets.

*Once considered a high-income country problem, overweight and obesity are now on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in urban settings. Close to 35 million overweight children are living in developing countries and 8 million in developed countries.*