



Childhood obesity

It can be difficult to make healthy food choices and get enough physical activity in an environment that does not support healthy habits. Child obesity is the consequence of such habits. Child obesity has quickly become one of the serious health problems of the 21st century. Research has shown that obesity is as a result of a flawed lifestyle rather than it being a genetic factor.

Overweight and obesity are defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health. Body mass index (BMI) is a simple index of weight-for-height that is commonly used to classify overweight and obesity in adults. It is defined as a person's weight in kilograms divided by the square of his height in meters (kg/m²).

Statistics from the World Health Organization shows that the number of overweight children aged 0 to 5 years have increased from 32 million globally in 1990 to 41 million in 2016. Almost half of all overweight children under 5 live in Asia and one quarter in Africa. The prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents aged 5-19 has risen dramatically from just 4% in 1975 to just over 18% in 2016. The rise has occurred similarly among both boys and girls: in 2016 18% of girls and 19% of boys were overweight. While just under 1% of children and adolescents aged 5-19 were obese in 1975, more 124 million children and adolescents (6% of girls and 8% of boys) were obese in 2016. Overweight and obesity are linked to more deaths worldwide than underweight. Globally there are more people who are obese than underweight - this occurs in every region except parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

The fundamental causes of overweight in children is the intake of energy-dense foods high in sugar and an increase in inactivity due to the sedentary lifestyle and urbanization. Overweight and obese children are likely to stay obese into adulthood and more likely to develop non communicable diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol at a younger age. These diseases are however preventable. Prevention of childhood obesity therefore needs high priority.

Key Facts

- Worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975.
- In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight. Of these over 650 million were obese.
- 39% of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight in 2016, and 13% were obese.
- Most of the world's population live in countries where overweight and obesity kills more people than underweight.
- 38 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese in 2019.
- Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese in 2016.
- Obesity is preventable.

How can overweight and obesity be reduced?

- Limit energy intake from total fats and sugars
- Increase consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as legumes, whole grains and nuts.
- Engage in regular physical activity (60 minutes a day for children and 150 minutes spread through the week for adults).
- Reducing the fat, sugar and salt content of processed foods.
- Ensuring that healthy and nutritious choices are available and affordable to all consumers
- Restricting marketing of foods high in sugars, salt and fats, especially those foods aimed at children and teenagers;
- Ensuring the availability of healthy food choices and supporting regular physical activity practice in the workplace.