4 March 2024, Cairo, Egypt – Today, World Obesity Day 2024, is a chance to highlight the need to talk about obesity and youth. Obesity is a major health issue in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. More than half of women (53%), nearly half of men (45%) and an alarming 8% of school-aged children and adolescents are obese, while 20.5% are overweight.

If no action is taken to address obesity, these figures are expected to rise.

World Obesity Day this year coincides with the holy month of Ramadan. The daily fasting period, from dawn to sunset, offers a structured way to reset one's relationship with food. It's a chance to develop healthier habits that can lead to sustainable weight loss and improved well-being.

Evidence suggests that fasting can positively affect health, including by strengthening the digestive system and improving its efficiency. It can also help to adjust fat and sugar levels in the blood, in turn reducing blood pressure and cholesterol and improving heart health.

To maximize the positive effects, fasting should be combined with a healthy diet. It's important to avoid unhealthy eating habits that negatively affect health and cause several forms of malnutrition, including obesity.

Obesity occurs when the body stores excess fat that may impair health. This complex condition can stem from various factors, such as a high-calorie diet, lack of physical activity, genetics and certain health conditions. Obesity can increase the likelihood of heart disease, diabetes, stroke and some types of cancer. It can also affect mental health, leading to issues like depression and low self-esteem.

By 2035, it is projected that obesity will affect more than 1.9 billion people globally – roughly 25% of the world population. This forecast includes a staggering 100% rise in childhood obesity, with an anticipated economic impact of US$ 4.32 trillion due to obesity-related health consequences.

To make the most of fasting during Ramadan to shed excess weight and boost overall health, WHO recommends the following nutritional guidance.

Hydrate before eating. Drink plenty of fluids before your meal to avoid dehydration. Water is best. Juice and milk also work, but limit drinks that are high in sugar and calories.

Enjoy a bowl of soup. Soups are a great choice to break your fast as they keep you hydrated and are full of vitamins and minerals. Choose nutrient-rich soups such as vegetable, tomato or lentil, and avoid cream-based soups. Cold soups, like gazpachos, are a good option in warmer weather.

Eat your greens. Vegetables are packed with vitamins, minerals and fibre. Colourful salads are healthier as each colour indicates different kinds of nutrients. Try to have 2 servings of vegetables at each meal, including a cup of raw leafy greens or half a cup of other raw vegetables.

Choose healthy carbohydrates. The Iftar meal should contain healthy, complex carbs. Brown rice, whole-grain pasta, whole-grain breads, potatoes and burghul can be good choices. Complex carbs are a great source of fibre and minerals as well as energy.

Eat lean protein. At Iftar, it's very important to consume healthy lean proteins such as beef, milk, yogurt, eggs, cheese, fish and poultry. These contain a variety of amino acids and are critical to maintain and produce muscle mass.

Don't rush your meal. Eating too much at once, too quickly, can cause indigestion and other gastric problems. Slowly eating smaller portions is better for your overall health and is the best way to prevent weight gain.

Avoid foods high in fat, sodium and sugar. Avoid fried meals. Bake, steam, grill, stew and roast foods instead. Use herbs and spices in place of salt. Eat fruits, which contain natural sugars, rather than sweets, cakes or other baked goods that contain refined sugar or artificial sweeteners.

Engage in a mild exercise routine. You may feel tired in the first few days of fasting. Don't push yourself to exercise too hard. Try a milder, low-impact exercise routine instead – like walking briskly just after sunset and right before dawn.

Safe fasting tips for high-risk individuals

Fasting can be a step towards a healthier, more balanced lifestyle for many people. But anyone with a health condition such as cardiac disease, hypertension or diabetes must seek medical advice before going ahead with a fast. Pregnant and breastfeeding women should also consult with their doctor.

Many Muslims with health conditions that put them at higher risk still decide to fast on Ramadan, even though they are exempted from doing so. It is important to take any necessary precautions while fasting to protect health and safety.

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