

14 November 2014 | Cairo, Egypt – On World Diabetes Day, 14 November, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) are calling on individuals to make healthy food choices, starting with breakfast, on countries to take immediate action to create environments and conditions to enable such choices, and on media, professionals and professional associations, and civil society to support public health actions to promote healthy diets as a key approach to prevent diabetes and reduce complications in those living with diabetes.

Diabetes is one of the major noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Unhealthy diet and sedentary lifestyles are two of the four main risk factors for NCDs, which are the leading causes of death in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR). NCDs account for over 2.2 million deaths annually, over 51% of which are premature. Diabetes, one of the four main NCDs, is closely linked to unhealthy lifestyles, especially diet, which in turn is linked to environments that promote unhealthy choices.

Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean points to the enormous burden of diabetes in the Region: “Over 14% of the population in the Eastern Mediterranean Region has diabetes, which is a critical challenge for our countries”. Rising diabetes prevalence in the region is closely related to the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity. New 2014 WHO estimates indicate that over 17% of people in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are obese.

“Diabetes is a menacing but hidden pandemic”, says Professor Adel El Sayed, Chair of the IDF MENA Region, “with up to half of all people with diabetes globally remaining undiagnosed”. Preventing diabetes in the first place, detecting it early in those unaware of it, and managing it well in those known to have it are the key approaches to address this public health challenge. “Much can be done to prevent type 2 diabetes and to effectively manage diabetes to avoid serious complications;” assures Dr El Sayed “healthy diets and promotion of environments that encourage and facilitate healthy food choices are central to such efforts.”

“The rapid acceleration in the rates of overweight, obesity and NCDs related to diet, such as diabetes, over the past few decades,” explains Dr Alwan “reflects the profound changes in lifestyles, particularly food intake patterns, in our populations.” With increasing urbanization, globalization, and economic improvements, dietary habits have become less healthy, and people more sedentary. Increasingly, diets are high in saturated fats, cholesterol, salt and refined carbohydrates, and low in polyunsaturated fats, fiber, fruits and vegetables. “Insufficient policy and public health response has exacerbated the situation,” adds Dr Alwan.

Promoting healthy eating and physical activity can prevent diabetes and other NCDs but “a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is central, as focusing on individual behaviors will not suffice,” Dr Alwan affirms. All stakeholders, across government, civil society, media, professional associations, and industry such as food manufacturers must be involved. Multisectoral action is required to build health literacy, raise awareness among the population and to make healthy food choices and improved physical activity the easy choice. But there are challenges to making this happen.

“Marketing of unhealthy foods, for example on TV and in schools, is rampant in the region,” says Dr Alwan “and this is triggering unhealthy food preferences and habits, especially in children and adolescents.” But “health leaders in the region are now determined to take action,” adds Dr Alwan. During the October 2014 session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean—a meeting of WHO, health ministers and other stakeholders—the ministers endorsed a new WHO initiative on “countering the largely unopposed commercial practices that promote unhealthy products, particularly those targeting children.”

On this World Diabetes Day, WHO and IDF call for concerted efforts to prevent diabetes that are commensurate with the profound public health burden of diabetes in the region.

For more information, please contact:

Dr Slim Slama  
WHO Medical Officer for Noncommunicable Diseases  
Tel: +202 22765696  
email: slamas@who.int  
[www.emro.who.int](http://www.emro.who.int) website:

#### About World Diabetes Day

World Diabetes Day raises global awareness of diabetes, its escalating rates around the world and how to prevent the illness in most cases. Initiated by WHO and the IDF, the Day is celebrated on 14 November every year to mark the birth of Frederick Banting who, along with Charles Best, was instrumental in the discovery of insulin in 1922, a life-saving treatment for diabetes patients.

[www.idf.org/worlddiabetesday](http://www.idf.org/worlddiabetesday) To learn more, visit

#### About WHO

In the 21st century, health is a shared responsibility, involving equitable access to essential care and collective defence against transnational threats. WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends.

[www.emro.who.int](http://www.emro.who.int) To learn more, visit

#### About the IDF

The IDF is an umbrella organization of over 200 national diabetes associations in over 160 countries. It represents the interests of the growing number of people with diabetes and those at risk. The Federation has been leading the global diabetes community since 1950. IDF's mission is to promote diabetes care, prevention and a cure worldwide.

[www.idf.org/](http://www.idf.org/) To learn more, visit

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