



Obesity has become a worldwide epidemic that is not restricted to adults. Unfortunately, child and adolescent obesity has become a major public health problem. Childhood obesity refers to children and youth between the ages of 2 and 18 years who suffer an excess of body fat reflected through their body mass index (BMI).

BMI is a weight-to-height ratio, and is calculated by dividing body weight in kilograms by the square of height in metres (kg/m^2). According to the International Obesity Task Force, at least 155 million of the world's children aged 5–17 are overweight. An additional 22 million children under the age of 5 years are also affected (International Obesity Task Force, 2004).

Magnitude of the problem in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Childhood overweight and obesity rates in the Region are alarming. In some countries, data shows that 80% children aged between 13 and 15 years old are overweight or obese. This phenomenon is alarming particularly in high-income countries or in megacities, such as Cairo, Egypt. About 60% of obese children or adolescents are more likely to become overweight adults.

The Region has already the second highest prevalence of diabetes in terms of population worldwide. According to global report on noncommunicable diseases (WHO, 2009) almost a quarter of the population in the Region has diabetes of one form or another. If current trends continue, diabetes is set to affect half of the population of the Region in the next 25 years.

Childhood obesity leads to serious lifelong health problem such as high blood pressure, stroke, type 2 diabetes, high blood fats and risk of heart disease, some forms of cancer as well as psychological and social problems due to low self-esteem from poor body image and psychological stress due to potential stigma.

Risk factors and trends

Several risk factors contribute to child obesity. The genetic factor increases the susceptibility of a child to gain weight, as the genes affect weight-related chemical processes in the body. The main factors causing child obesity are unhealthy eating habits, physical inactivity and over exposure to aggressive marketing from the catering corporate making energy dense foods and drinks more tempting, affordable and readily available.

WHO campaign to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in the Region

The WHO Regional Office is implementing a campaign to reduce childhood obesity in Member States of the Region. The objectives of the campaign are to:

- raise awareness of key stakeholders about the childhood obesity, risk factors health and economic impact
- mobilize media on issue of childhood obesity
- advocate with policy-makers within and outside the health realm for the development of public policies to promote healthy diet and physical activities.

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