

Amman, Jordan, 13 September 2015 – The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is holding in Jordan an open forum on unopposed marketing of unhealthy food and beverages targeting children on 13–14 September 2015. This event is part of WHO's initiative to fight overweight and obesity, a condition that affects more than 42 million children under the age of 5 worldwide. Obese infants and children are likely to continue being obese during adulthood and are more likely to develop a variety of health problems, including cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, musculoskeletal disorders and some cancers, including endometrial, breast and colon, as well as disability.

Unopposed marketing refers to the lack of legal and social control required for the community to be protected from the commercially driven industrial epidemics. Scientific research shows that marketing that encourages the consumption of fast foods and sodas is causing an unprecedented upsurge in childhood obesity. A key contributor to chronic diseases is unhealthy weight. The prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is alarming, among both adults and children. The prevalence of overweight is 46.8%, higher than the global average of 39% and obesity is 19%, higher than the global average of 12.9%.

During the 2-day forum, participants from regional media networks, artists, youth groups and from social media, along with health experts, will be discussing creative ways to reduce children's exposure to marketing of foods and drinks high in fat sugar and salt. Participants will discuss how better to protect children from commercial risks to health.

"I called for the launching of this initiative because it was clear to me that if marketing of unhealthy food to children continues to be unopposed, it will have a devastating impact on the health of children and the next generation in this Region," said Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. "An alarming fact is that, unless effective action is taken, for the first time in history, our younger generations' life expectancy is expected to be shorter than that of their parents," he stressed.

In 2014, ministries of health of Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region raised concerns about their inability to control the marketing of unhealthy products – especially fast foods and sodas – targeted at the general public and particularly at children. The companies that produce and market these products have become too big and too powerful to control.

“We are not talking about banning the marketing of every food product, but about the kind of marketing that promotes unhealthy food and that specifically targets children in places where they live, play and study and will result in a generation suffering from epidemic of chronic diseases worse than the epidemic we already see today,” Dr Alwan explained.

“This can only be achieved through social change and massive social mobilization including the involvement of media, artists, and responsible youth groups. Media plays a key role in restricting advertising and in educating the general public. Artists are role models for youth and youth groups play a great role in education,” he emphasized.

By the end of the forum, participants are expected to agree on a list of concrete clear actions to be undertaken by the media to reduce the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages.

Related link

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