Cairo, 5 April 2016 – In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, more than 65% of adults and 20% of adolescents are currently overweight or obese. Evidence shows that the excessive consumption of sugar is not only a major contributor to the epidemic of obesity but is also leading to increased prevalence of diabetes and tooth decay in children and adults.

In order to lower sugar intake and reduce the prevalence of type 2 diabetes and obesity in the Region, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, has released a policy statement, including recommended actions, to address the problem. The policy statement and recommended actions are part of WHO's effort to reach the global target of halting the rise in diabetes and obesity and reduce the burden of premature deaths due to noncommunicable diseases by 25% by 2025.

WHO is asking governments to consider introducing a progressive and sustainable reduction in national sugar intake over the coming 3 to 4 years. Substantial falls in sugar intake are now considered necessary to halt the rise in diabetes and obesity. "In some countries, people are consuming more than 85 grams of sugar per person a day," said Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director.

WHO recommends that children and adults should consume less than 10%, or preferably 5% (roughly 25 grams per person a day) of free sugars in their diet. In high- and middle-income countries, sugar consumption ranges from 9% to 15%. Even in low-income countries it can be as high as 12%. Children, especially school children and young adults, usually have exceptionally high intakes. Most of the sugars consumed in the Region come from sweets, juices and excessive sugar added to tea –all part of our daily diet. For example, one can of a sugar-sweetened soft drink contains about 40g of sugar, which is higher than the entire recommended amount of sugar for a child in a day.

"We urge countries to put in place the necessary measures to reduce the levels of sugar in people's diet to improve their health. Decision-makers need to seriously consider actions taken by other countries to increase the retail price of soft drinks through taxes. They also need to consider policies to reformulate food products by reducing their sugar content. And equally important, they need to impose restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy sugar-rich food and beverages, especially to children," Dr Alwan explained. "Special measures are required to address this unopposed marketing on satellite television channels and across all digital media."

Other measures that could be taken to minimize sugar intake include:

- implementing policies to progressively reduce the amount of sugar in products being offered for sale in government-sponsored institutions;
- restricting promotions, such as offering two products for the price of one or increasing portion sizes for the same price, on sugar-enriched products, especially drinks;
- using nutritional profiling to establish clear definitions of foods and drinks high in sugar in order that consumers are not misled on the sugar content of products;
- eliminating sugar subsidies provided by national governments and introducing progressive taxes initially on sugary drinks, and then on other foods rich in sugar; and
 - providing routine health education to populations.

Related link

Policy statement and recommended actions for lowering sugar intake and reducing prevalence of type 2 diabetes and obesity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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