

Governments must act to reverse alarming rise in childhood obesity, UN report warns

25 January 2016 – Facing a global epidemic in childhood obesity with the number of overweight children under five on track to jump from 42 million to 70 million over the next decade, a United Nations report today called on governments to reverse the trend by promoting healthy foods and physical activity.

The marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages is a major factor in the alarming increase, which rose from 31 million in 1990 to 41 million in 2014, particularly in the developing world, with the greatest rise coming from low- and middle-income countries, according to the report by the [Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity](#) (ECHO).

“Increased political commitment is needed to tackle the global challenge of childhood overweight and obesity,” said Peter Gluckman, co-chair ECHO, which presented its report to UN World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan today.

“WHO needs to work with Governments to implement a wide range of measures that address the environmental causes of obesity and overweight, and help give children the healthy start to life they deserve,” he added.

The report, which took two years to compile, makes six recommendations:

- Promote intake of healthy foods and reduce the intake of unhealthy foods and sugar-sweetened beverages by children and adolescents, through effective taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages and curbing the marketing of unhealthy foods, for example.
- Promote physical activity with comprehensive programmes that reduce sedentary behaviours in children and adolescents.
- Preconception and pregnancy care to reduce the risk of childhood obesity by preventing low or high birth weight, prematurity and other complications in pregnancy.
- Early childhood diet and physical activity, promoting breastfeeding; limiting consumption of foods high in fat, sugar and salt, ensuring availability of healthy foods and fostering physical activity in the early child care settings.
- Health, nutrition and physical activity, establishing standards for school meals, eliminating the sale of unhealthy foods and drinks, and including health and nutrition and quality physical education in the core curriculum.
- Weight management, providing family-based, multi component, lifestyle weight management services for children and young people who are obese.

“Overweight and obesity impact on a child’s quality of life, as they face a wide range of barriers, including physical, psychological and health consequences,” ECHO co-chair Sania Nishtar said.

“We know that obesity can impact on educational attainment too and this, combined with the likelihood that they will remain obese into adulthood, poses major health and economic consequences for them, their families and society as a whole.”

According to the report, many children are growing up today in environments encouraging weight gain and obesity. Driven by globalization and urbanization, exposure to unhealthy environments is increasing in high-, middle- and low-income countries and across all socioeconomic groups, with the marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic a major factor.

In 2014, almost half (48 per cent) of all overweight and obese children below the age of 5 lived in Asia and one quarter in Africa. The number of overweight children aged under five in Africa has nearly doubled since 1990 from 5.4 million to 10.3 million.

The report urges WHO to institutionalize a cross-cutting and life-course approach to ending childhood obesity, recommends that non-Governmental organizations raise the profile of the problem, and calls on the private sector to support the production of and improved access to healthy foods and beverages.