



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
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Obesity - a preventable and harmful chronic disease

Pretoria: South Africa will on Monday, 4 March join the global community to mark World Obesity Day to raise awareness and improve understanding of obesity root causes and actions needed to address them and tackle associated stigma.

Obesity has become one of the biggest health crises faced by people today around the world. According to the World Health Organization, obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, claiming at least 2.8 million lives annually, while 1 in 8 people in the world were living with obesity in 2022.

The rise in obesity poses a serious challenge to public health worldwide. South Africa is amongst the countries with the highest overweight and obesity rates. According to the 2016 national survey, 68% of women and 31% of men have either overweight or obesity, while 13% of children under the age of 5 are overweight.

In terms of obesity, at least 41% of women have obesity with 20% of them falling in the severe obesity category. In contrast, only 11% of men have obesity. The prevalence of obesity among women rose from 27% in 1998 to 41% in 2016. There was very little change in obesity amongst men with only 2% increase during the same period.

These worrying figures underscore the need for effective prevention interventions to address obesity and promote healthier lifestyles and setting nutrition standards for food and beverages provided in places like Early Child Development Centres, schools, community nutrition development centres and other feeding programmes.

The increased prevalence of overweight and obesity among people contributes to the onset of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension and cancer, which are currently the biggest threats to health and development among populations.

Women with obesity are at increased risk of miscarriage, pre-eclampsia, induced labour, and are less likely to initiate breastfeeding. On the other hand, obese men are at a higher risk of developing cancers of colon, rectum and erection dysfunction.

The words obesity and overweight are often confused and used interchangeably. However, these are two related health conditions with slightly different meanings. Overweight is when a body mass index (a value derived from the mass and height of a person) is greater than or equal to 25, whereas obesity is a BMI is greater than or equal to 30.

Evidence shows that interventions (such as improved diet and physical activity) introduced to tackle obesity have the potential benefits to reduce the incidence of NCDs and its burden on healthcare spending, individuals and their families, hence the Department of Health urges people to engage in regular physical activity, drink lots of water, serve correct amount of food to avoid over eating, limit consumption of foods and drinks high in sugar, salt and fat, snack with fresh vegetables and fruits instead of salty snacks or sugary treats.

Many people exercise day and night to keep fit and healthy, but it important to know 80/20 rule for weight loss, which emphasizes that nutrition contributes 80% and routine exercise contributes only 20% when it comes to losing weight. This means, as long as you don't make healthier food choices, physical activities will do less to reduce obesity.

The department urges employers to support efforts by government and other stakeholders by creating healthy and productive working environments for employees as part of health and wellness programmes. This includes establishing wellness centres and serving healthier food menus in their canteens.

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