

Editorial

Obesity: A Growing Problem in China

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Obesity is defined as excessive body fat accumulated to the extent that presents a risk to health. A measure of obesity is the body mass index (BMI), a person's weight (in kilograms) divided by the square of the person's height (in meters). A person with a BMI of 30 or over is generally considered obese, and a BMI of 25 or over considered overweight.¹

Obesity is a major risk factor for chronic diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer. Obesity also damages productivity. Obese people move slower and are sick from work more often due to complications of diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Obesity was once considered a problem only in high-income countries, and now, however, it is dramatically increasing in developing countries.¹ Unfortunately, at present, nearly one-third of the world's population is obese or overweight, i.e., 2.1 billion.²

The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that even though undernutrition and infectious diseases dominate the current public health concerns, obesity would soon become the most significant cause of poor health.³ In China, 10.8% of men and 14.9% of women of 1.4 billion people are overweight by 2016, which is the largest number of overweight people in the world.⁴ China's obesity has outpaced the economic growth. Beside urban areas, obesity rates in rural China are skyrocketing. For instance, in rural Shandong province, the rate of obese and overweight boys jumped from 0.5% in 1985 to 30.7% in 2014; in girls, the percentage increased from 0.8% to 20.6% over the same period.⁵ But what in fact leads to the sudden increase? Three main factors are listed below.

- High-energy Western diet: fast food, soft drink, sugar offerings (KFC, McDonald's, Starbucks, etc.);

- De-emphasis on sports and more time behind computer and television screens;

- Overfeeding children with rising disposable incomes.

Obesity is a public health problem considering its prevalence, costs, and health effects. Funding, innovation and an understanding the link to overnutrition are key elements in winning the battle.⁶ Governments should take the lead in dealing with obesity problems. Regulations against related advertisements should be enacted; national tax can be implemented on certain products (e.g., soft drinks and processed food) to reduce consumption; awareness about healthy eating, exercise and the danger of obesity should be promoted; and all related institutions should get involved.

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