

World Health Organization (WHO) Gets Aggressive on Obesity

EMMA ROSS, Associated Press, 5/15/2002

GENEVA (AP) - Obesity has reached such epidemic proportions that world health officials have decided they need to take a more aggressive approach if they are to head off a global explosion of fat-related diseases.

After years of focusing on promoting healthy eating to dampen demand for junk food, the World Health Organization is now examining what can be done on the supply side - enlisting the cooperation of food producers.

In the last two years, experts have confirmed that obesity, diabetes and heart disease - commonly thought to be afflictions of the affluent - are spreading to the developing world, but new research provides the clearest picture yet of the global situation.

Studies presented Wednesday at the annual meeting of the WHO's decision making body provide the first major insight into childhood obesity rates in the developing world.

The picture looks all too familiar, even in regions suffering from malnutrition. Figures from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean were included.

"We estimate that 22 million of the world's children under 5 are overweight or obese," said Mary Bellizzi, an expert with the International Obesity Task Force who presented the research to health ministers at the meeting.

Research indicates that in some parts of Africa, fatness and obesity afflicts more children than malnutrition does - sometimes four times as many.

"In small studies in Africa you will find that 0.7 percent of the children are showing features of malnutrition, but over 3 percent are showing up overweight or obese," said Neville Rigby, public affairs director at the International Obesity Task Force.

The organization estimates that 300 million people worldwide are obese and 750 million more are overweight.

In the United States, some 60 percent of adults are overweight or obese, as are nearly 13 percent of children.

The obesity task force estimates that in some countries, more than 30 percent of the children are obese.

Bellizzi reported that in Egypt more than 25 percent of 4-year-olds are fat and that obesity rates are also more than 25 percent among children aged between 4 and 10 in Chile, Peru and Mexico.

In Zambia and Morocco, between 15 and 20 percent of 4-year-olds are obese.

"I think it's time to do something serious," Bellizzi said, after the meeting. "Education is not enough."

"You have to look at food production, food importation - the production of sugar, the production of oil, that has to go into food and that food is ultimately sold to consumers," she said.

"If we continue with this production, that produce has to go somewhere and people have to eat it, so I think we need to have a radical look at food supply in order to make sure that food that is supplied to the public is lower in fat, sugar and salt," Bellizzi said.

WHO experts are starting to do just that.

"Our general view is that guilting people, in the long run, doesn't work," said Dr. Derek Yach, WHO executive director for noncommunicable diseases and mental health.

"There are two strategies. One is working at the level of individuals, to give them the best information so that they can make informed choices," he said. "Step two often requires removing some of the heavy handed marketing that may block them making those choices in an informed way, particularly at a young age."

Although WHO believes junk food consumption has to be controlled, it is not approaching the issue as aggressively as it has tackled tobacco.

WHO has a combative relationship with the tobacco industry and is crafting international legislation to seriously curtail tobacco consumption.

"We think that before we enter into policy decisions about food, we have very serious discussions to have with the food industry," Yach said.

"We believe there is an enormous potential to work together to solve these problems, whereas we didn't believe that in the case of the tobacco industry.

"Our preliminary discussions with the food industry indicate a great willingness to talk to us," he said.

"It may very well be that they will look at advertising, but we are interested in what they will do positively with us - promoting physical activity on a worldwide scale, trying to make the less salty, less sugary, less fatty products more available and more attractive to young people."

On the Net:

World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int>

International Obesity Task Force, <http://www.iotf.org>