

## THE GLOBAL OBESITY EPIDEMIC



The scale never lies.

Obesity is one of today's most visible – yet most neglected – public health problems, at the other end of the malnutrition scale. Paradoxically coexisting with undernutrition, an escalating global epidemic of overweight and obesity – also called «**globesity**» – is taking over many parts of the world. If immediate action is not taken, millions will suffer from an array of serious health disorders.

Overweight and obesity are defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health. A crude population measure of obesity is the body mass index (BMI): a person's weight (in kilograms) divided by the square of his or her height (in metres). A person with a BMI of 30 or more is generally considered obese; a person with a BMI equal to or more than 25 is considered overweight.

Obesity is a complex condition, one with serious social and psychological dimensions, that affects virtually all age and socioeconomic groups and threatens to overwhelm both developed

and developing countries. In 1995, there were an estimated 200 million obese adults worldwide and another 18 million under-five children classified as overweight. As of 2000, the number of obese adults has increased to over 300 million. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the obesity epidemic is not restricted to industrialized societies; in developing Countries, it is estimated that over 115 million people suffer from obesity-related problems.

Generally, although men may have higher rates of overweight, women have higher rates of obesity. For both, obesity poses a major risk for serious diet-related diseases, including diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, and certain forms of cancer. Its health consequences range from increased risk of premature death to serious chronic conditions that reduce the overall quality of life.

The World Health Organization began sounding the alarm in the 1990s, spearheading a series of expert

and technical consultations. Public awareness campaigns were also initiated to sensitize policy-makers, private sector partners, medical professionals and the public at large. Aware that obesity is predominantly a «social and environmental disease», WHO is helping to develop strategies that will make healthy choices easier to make. WHO is calculating the worldwide economic impact of overweight and obesity. It is also working to analyze the impact that globalization and rapid socioeconomic transition have on nutrition and to identify the main political, socioeconomic, cultural and physical factors which promote obesogenic environments.

[Adapted from World Health Organization, 2011.]

### Answer the following questions.

- What is the difference between overweight and obesity?
- What risks does obesity pose?