

New WHO analysis shows alarming rates of overweight children

According to a new report published by the WHO Regional Office for Europe,¹ being overweight is so common that it risks becoming a new norm in the WHO European Region. For example, up to 27% of 13-year-olds and 33% of 11-year olds are overweight.

“Our perception of what is normal has shifted; being overweight is now more common than unusual. We must not let another generation grow up with obesity as the new norm,” said the WHO Regional Director for Europe, Zsuzsanna Jakab. “Physical inactivity – coupled with a culture that promotes cheap, convenient foods high in fats, salt and sugars – is deadly.”

The country profiles² made by the Regional Office give a bleak picture of nutrition, obesity and physical inactivity in the European Region’s 53 Member States. The profiles were launched at a conference³ in Athens, Greece at the opening event for the Greek Presidency of the European Union (EU).

Among 11-year-old boys and girls, the prevalence of overweight was highest in Greece (33%), Portugal (32%), Ireland (30%) and Spain (30%) and lowest in the Netherlands (13%) and Switzerland (11%). The figure below, taken from the country profiles,² shows the prevalence of overweight in 13-year-olds in the European Region.

Physical inactivity: part of the problem

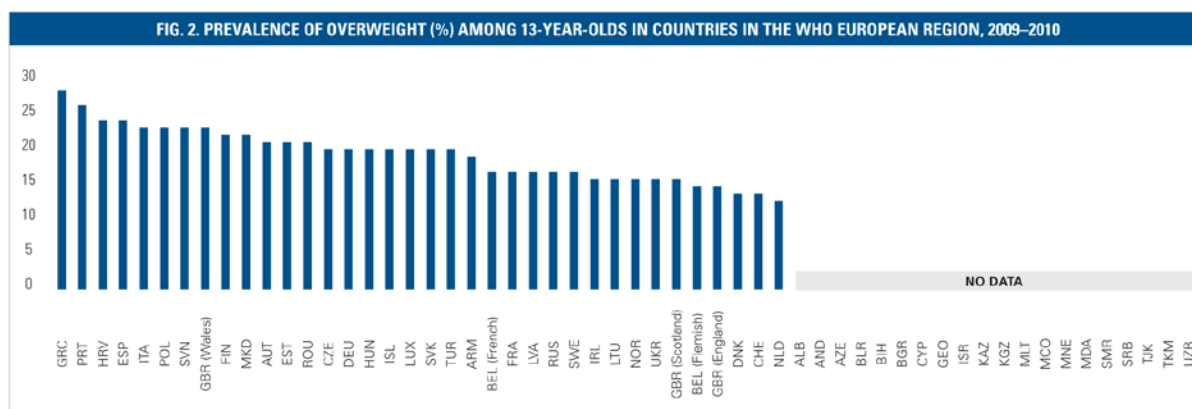
In 23 out of 36 countries, more than 30% of boys and girls aged 15 years and over are not getting enough physical activity. Among adults, women’s rates of insufficient physical activity range from 16% in Greece and 17% in Estonia to 71% in Malta and 76% in Serbia.

“We need to create environments where physical activity is encouraged and the healthy food choice is the default choice, regardless of social group. Physical activity and healthy food choices should be taken very seriously in all environments – schools, hospitals, cities, towns and workplaces. As well as the food industry, the urban planning sector can make a difference,” said Joao Breda, Programme Manager, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity at the Regional Office.

¹ Marketing of foods high in salt fat and sugar to children. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2013 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Life-stages/child-and-adolescent-health/publications/2013/marketing-of-foods-high-in-fat,-salt-and-sugar-to-children-update-20122013>, accessed 25 February 2014).

² Country profiles. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2014 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/nutrition-country-profiles>, accessed 25 February 2014).

³ Conference on nutrition and physical activity from childhood to old age. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2014 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2014/02/conference-on-nutrition-and-physical-activity-from-childhood-to-old-age>, accessed 25 February 2014).



Notes: The country codes refer to the ISO 3166-1 Alpha-3 country codes. Overweight is defined as a BMI-for-age value above +1 Z-score relative to the 2007 WHO growth reference median.

Source: Currie C et al., eds. *Social determinants of health and well-being among young people: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study: international report from the 2009/2010 survey*. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2012 (Health Policy for Children and Adolescents, No. 6) (http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/163857/Social-determinants-of-health-and-well-being-among-young-people.pdf, accessed 24 July 2013).

What countries are doing right

Some countries have managed to contain the epidemic; France and some Scandinavian countries at least keep it at a stable level. These countries have implemented policies through a whole-of-government approach and intersectoral initiatives in line with Health 2020, the WHO policy framework for health.⁴ The palette of actions includes the promotion of vegetable and fruit consumption in school, along with school lunch initiatives, taxes on foods to reduce intake, tighter controls of advertising, sound systems for surveillance and monitoring, and action to promote physical activity, especially among children.

WHO recommends the following action at different levels, **National governments** can enforce legislation and insist on informative labelling, nutrient profiling and regulated marketing of food products, requiring the food industry to take responsibility. **Local governments** can make healthy foods available, and insist on town planning and infrastructure that encourage healthy lifestyles and make the healthy choices easy choices. At the **individual** level, consumers can be empowered to make informed choices through having access to adequate information.

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⁴ Health 2020: the European policy for health and well-being. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2014 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-policy/health-2020-the-european-policy-for-health-and-well-being>, accessed 25 February 2014).