

OBESITY IN EUROPE

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The number of obese people has nearly tripled in the world since 1975, with over 650 million people now classified as obese. In Europe, it is estimated that 17% of adults live with obesity, and 36% with core-obesity¹, meaning that more than 50% of the European population is overweight.

Obesity is a medical condition defined by the World Health Organisation as an excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health.² A Body Mass Index (BMI) above 30 is considered as the obese range. It is a chronic disease, which increases the risks of other non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnoea and cancer. Not only does it threaten an individuals' health, but it is also a growing burden for health systems. It is estimated that countries spend on average 8.4% of their health budget on the treatment of overweight-related diseases.³ In Europe, €70 billion are spent annually in direct and indirect cost.⁴ Yet, **obesity is a preventable disease.**

1. Causes

The main reason for overweight and obesity is an energy imbalance between the calories expended and the calories consumed. Obesity can result from a combination of factors, such as personal behaviour but also

by genetics. For instance, it can be caused by a **lack of physical activity**, an unhealthy diet, some medications, or the environment e.g. home, the workplace, or school situations.

Childhood obesity is also a growing problem, which is defined by WHO as greater than two standard deviations about the Growth Reference median.⁵ On average, nearly one in eight children aged 7-8 is obese in EU countries. Over 60% of children who are overweight before puberty will be overweight in early adulthood,⁶ and it is also associated with a higher chance of premature death and disability in adulthood. In addition to future risks, obese children experience health issues such as breathing difficulties, hypertension, an increased risk of fractures, as well as early markers of cardiovascular disease.⁷ Besides genetics, sedentariness and unhealthy diets that are high-calories and low-nutrient greatly contribute to childhood obesity.

2. Prevention measures

Obesity is preventable, including for children, as it can be addressed through behavioural changes. A healthy diet and regular physical activity can help adults and children to maintain a healthy weight. The World Health Organization recommends **regular physical activity for people at all**

¹ Over Half of Adults in the EU Are Overweight, Eurostat. 21 July 2021. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3AJ9lIZ>

² Obesity and Overweight, World Health Organisation. 9 June 2021. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3CKLgVA>

³ The Heavy Burden of Obesity: The Economics of Prevention, OECD Health Policy Studies. 2019. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3ugNu2T>

⁴ Europe's Obesity Challenge, Fredrik Erixon. ECIPE 07/2016. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3CNsuUD>

⁵ Obesity and Overweight, WHO.

⁶ The challenge of obesity- quick statistics, WHO Europe. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3AA3uPT>

⁷ Obesity and Overweight", WHO.

ages.⁸ Adults should indeed do at least 150-300 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity every week, including muscle strengthening activities for additional health benefits. For children under 5 years of age, it is recommended that they spend at least 180 minutes in a variety of different physical activity, of which at least 60 minutes should be moderate to vigorous intensity. Children and adolescents aged 5-17 years should do at least an average of 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous intensity.

Regular physical activity is particularly important during childhood, as it helps the development of motor, cognitive and social skills. However, more than 20% of children in Europe are not taking part in the recommended one hour of active playing per day, which contributes to the increase in childhood obesity. **Promoting physical activity** among children is therefore of crucial importance, as the repercussions of childhood obesity will otherwise last through adulthood. Over one third of adults are also insufficiently active, and there is a continued rise of sedentary behaviour. It is recognised that increasing the levels of physical activity would have very concrete effects on the obesity rates in Europe.

3. EU actions to tackle Obesity

At European level, the Commission established a strategy to address obesity in May 2007, which lists actions to be taken at local, regional, national and European levels to reduce the lack of regular exercise and tackle overweight risk factors.⁹ Because there is a consensus among EU Member States that overweight and obesity among

children and young people needs to be a priority in terms of health promotion, the EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity released in 2014 also had the ambition to halt the increase of obesity in young people (0-18 years) by 2020.¹⁰ The aim was to promote healthier environments, increase research, and encourage healthy diet and physical activity.

As of 2021, Obesity prevention and action plans will now be included in [Europe's Beating Cancer Plan](#), which aims at addressing cancer risk factors such as obesity and lack of physical activity. A follow-up of the Action Plan will thus be elaborated, and new policy documents on the matter can be expected. The [MEP interest group on Obesity and Health Systems Resilience](#) was launched this year, with the aim to promote policy developments to prevent obesity and raise awareness. In addition, the Commission published a new dedicated page on [obesity prevention](#) as part of their Health Promotion Knowledge Gateway.

A healthy lifestyle during childhood, which includes a healthy diet and exercising regularly, tends to pave the way for healthier behaviours during adulthood, thus ensuring a healthy population and more sustainable health systems. Simply making more people, more active, more often, would contribute to reducing the obesity rates in Europe and worldwide.

⁸ Physical Activity, World Health Organisation. 26 November 2020. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3o2svzR>

⁹ Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-Related Health Issues, European Commission. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3udpltZ>

¹⁰ EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020, European Commission. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3AFUzfS>