

South Africa is determined to turn the tide on the obesity crisis

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From children to adults, women to men, overweight and obesity is an ever-increasing health risk in South Africa. The link between obesity and the onset of non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease is well-established. During the past two pandemic years, we've also seen obesity highlighted as a serious Covid co-morbidity leading to complications and even death among those who tested positive for the virus.



Loss of life is the ultimate price to pay for obesity, but it's not the only cost. Both the public and private healthcare systems in South Africa are challenged by the range of health issues associated with overweight and obesity. On an individual level, obesity commonly impacts productivity and household income. Weight discrimination and stigma also take a toll on the well-being of overweight and obese people.

The World Obesity Federation reminds us that the 'roots of obesity run deep' and sustainable solutions to this escalating global issue are far more complex than individual accountability. From biology and genetics to healthcare access, life events and mental health; from food systems to food marketing, there can be a range of intertwined factors that can lead to obesity. South Africa has a rapidly urbanising population, and lifestyle and behaviour changes are part of this transition. Many South African urban areas are close to being 'food deserts' where fresh produce and healthy whole foods are scarce and instead there's an abundance of cheap, nutrient-poor, high fat, high sugar, highly processed foods. In communities where there is a high crime rate as well as a dire lack of safe, green spaces and sports facilities, a sedentary lifestyle is common and regarded as more secure.

Tackling obesity in South Africa is going to require a multi-dimensional approach involving many stakeholders including a number of government departments, the healthcare and education systems, and corporate and industry players. According to the National Department of Health, the prevention and management of obesity should not only be the responsibility of individuals and health care workers, but also requires the transformation of our food systems to provide healthy food choices that are affordable, available and accessible for all South Africans.

The International Food Research Institute defines food systems as “the sum of actors and interactions along the food value chain—from input supply and production of crops, livestock, fish, and other agricultural commodities to transportation, processing, retailing, wholesaling, and preparation of foods to consumption and disposal. Food systems also include the enabling policy environments and cultural norms around food.”

Association for Dietetics in South Africa (Adsa) president, Maria van der Merwe says, “Different solutions and strategies need to be identified to improve support of healthy lifestyles in South Africa, where our nutritional challenges span the spectrum of malnutrition from food insecurity and insufficient nutrition to overweight and obesity.”

From child stunting to adult heart disease, South Africa pays high health care costs as a result of food systems that are either inadequate at getting food to people who are in need and in making healthy eating options readily available. Professor Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) adds, “Understanding your environment and the causes of obesity can help us adapt and make behavioural changes despite the challenges we face. We encourage people to seek out opportunities to live healthier, increase activity levels and eat better. In partnership, we will continue to work towards a healthier environment for all South Africans.”

The National Department of Health has joined forces with Adsa and HSFSA to raise awareness on World Obesity Day, 4 March. The partners will host a World Obesity Day webinar to discuss the 2022 theme ‘Everybody needs to act to make healthier choices easier’.

The World Obesity Day Webinar ‘Everybody needs to act to make healthier choices easier’ takes place on 4 March 2022, 10:30am – 12:00pm. [Register here](#).

Webinar Programme

Facilitator: Prof Pamela Naidoo, HSFSA

- Opening, welcome and update on WOD 2021 commitments
Dr Tshimi Lynn Moeng-Mahlangu, Cluster: Health Promotion, Nutrition & Oral Health, NDoH
- Announcement on CPD point
Retha Harmse, Adsa executive committee member in the portfolio Public Relations
- Paradigm shift in obesity
Dr Sundeep Ruder, Clinical Endocrinologist, Life Fourways Hospital
- Complications in obesity – real world examples
Dr Jeanne Lubbe, Division of Surgery, University of Stellenbosch
- Are techniques used to measure obesity correct?
Dr Tshimi Lynn Moeng-Mahlangu, NDoH
- Desktop review: Foods procured by and nutritional status of South Africans
Prof Rina Swart, University of the Western Cape
- How to make food systems work for obesity prevention
Prof Corinna Hawkes, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London
- Questions and answers
Ms Rebone Ntsie, Directorate: Nutrition, NDoH
- Closure

- **Nutrition to power up active lifestyles** 10 Apr 2024
- **Let's talk about SA women and obesity** 4 Mar 2024
- **Navigating 2024's top nutrition trends with insights from registered dietitians** 25 Jan 2024
- **How dietitians handle the holiday season** 8 Dec 2023
- **Vital role of nutrition in the TB recovery journey** 14 Nov 2023

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The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) is the professional organisation for Registered Dietitians. The primary aims of the Association are to serve the interests of dietitian in South Africa and promote the nutritional well being of the community.

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