

# We must tackle the growing burden of obesity

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**In 2010, the OECD’s influential report, *Fit not Fat: Obesity and the Economics of Prevention*, warned about the rapidly rising challenge of obesity and its consequences for our health.**

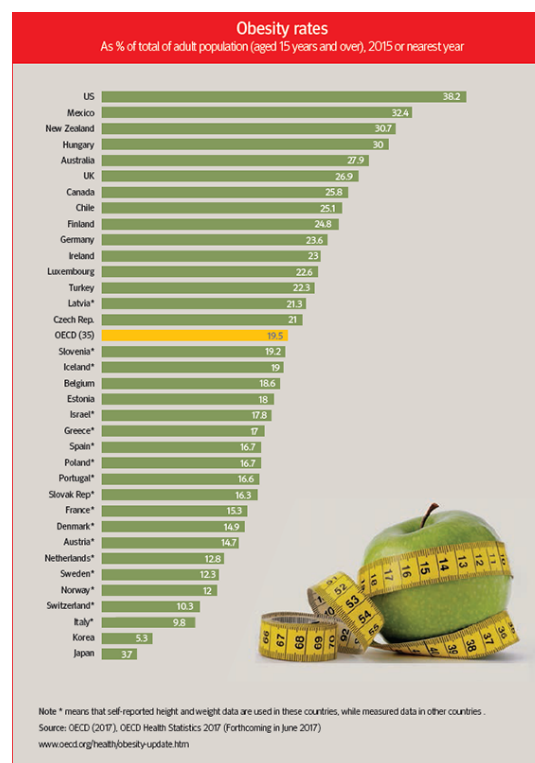
Nearly a decade later, the situation has unfortunately not improved enough. Our new data released in May show that the obesity epidemic has spread further, even though this has happened at a slower pace than before. Today, over half of all adults and nearly one in six children are overweight or obese in the OECD area. In the United States and Mexico, one out of every three adults is obese. Social disparities persist and have increased in some countries. Less-educated women are two to three times more likely to be overweight than those with a higher level of education.

Obesity rates have grown rapidly in England, Mexico and the United States since the 1990s. The outlook for the future is worrying as new projections show a continuing increase of obesity if no significant change occurs. Obesity rates are projected to increase at a faster pace in Korea and Switzerland where rates have been historically low.

There are many reasons why we must tackle obesity. Obesity is a key risk factor for numerous chronic diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The failure of health systems to tackle obesity leads to millions of deaths and disability. This also damages our economies. Obese people are less likely to be employed than normal-weight people. They are less productive at work due to

more sick days and fewer worked hours, and they earn about 10% less than non-obese people.

The good news is that much of this is preventable, as OECD work shows. Comprehensive policy packages, including school-based and worksite interventions, interventions in primary care settings, and broader regulatory and fiscal policies can address obesity effectively. A number of countries have recently implemented policies, ranging from tax measures—for example, in Belgium, Chile, Finland, France, Hungary, and Mexico—and subsidies to encourage active commuting instead of cars. The latter was implemented at the subnational level in Canada and France, while France and Sweden both prescribe physical activity. Canada, Chile, Korea, and the UK have reformulated food products, and France, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and New York City have made changes in portion sizes.



In the past few years, new policies to fight obesity have emerged, including communication. Improving nutrient information displayed on food labels through easy-to-understand symbols placed on the front of pre-packaged food products can help consumers make healthier food choices. These

symbols exist in Australia, Chile, Denmark, England, France, Iceland, Korea, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, and Sweden. Health promotion campaigns have also been spread through social media. Examples of health-promotion-dedicated websites, mobile apps and online tools to help people change their behaviour can

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be seen in Chile, Estonia, England and the Netherlands. Some countries have reinforced the marketing regulation of potentially unhealthy foods and sweetened beverages directed at children and young adults. Chile, Iceland, Ireland, and Mexico, for example, ban food and beverage advertising on television and radio during peak children audience hours. Other bans apply in schools, for example, in Chile, Spain, Turkey and Poland, in public transport in Australia, and in theatres in Norway. While the impact of these policies has not been fully evaluated yet, early evidence shows they empower people to make healthier choices, and can also affect food manufacturers' behaviour.

These are just some examples. Most OECD countries are now using simultaneously complementary policy tools and creating synergies to promote healthier lifestyles. But there is no room for complacency. OECD countries on average still allocate only around 3% of their health budgets to public health and prevention. Addressing obesity requires investment and comprehensive policies that target broad social and environmental determinants. Crucially, it requires strong leadership and political will.

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Visit [www.oecd.org/health/obesity-update.htm](http://www.oecd.org/health/obesity-update.htm)

## References

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