

Prevent obesity in the first 1,000 days of a child's life, experts say

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OVERWEIGHT and obese children are more likely to stay obese in adulthood and to develop non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases at a younger age, the World Health Organization (WHO) said.

Obese children and adolescents may also suffer from both short-term and longterm health consequences. Factors contributing to the increasing problem of overweight and obesity include poor diet, inadequate nutrition, and failing food systems.

Additionally, limited physical activity is likewise contributing to the growing problem on overweight and obesity. Prevention remains to be the most feasible option for curbing the childhood obesity epidemic.

Overweight and obesity

WITH the Philippines suffering from a triple burden of malnutrition together with other forms of undernutrition including stunting and wasting, micronutrient deficiencies, along with overweight and obesity, the Department of Health (DOH), National Nutrition Council (NNC), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), WHO, and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) jointly called on the public, civil society organizations, the academe, and the private sector to take action to prevent and manage childhood overweight and obesity.

Overweight and obesity are complex and multifaceted problems that would require multisectoral and comprehensive strategies to effectively and sustainably prevent and manage.

Sustainable, responsive, resilient and functional food systems can enable better and healthier diets. However, while the food systems encompass a range of public and private actors, the role of government is crucial in developing and implementing programs and policies that address the production, distribution, accessibility, and utilization of food in the country.

Low prevalence

THE results of the Expanded National Nutrition Survey conducted by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) in 2019 reported a relatively low prevalence of overweight at 2.9 percent among children under five years old; medium prevalence of 9.1 percent and 9.8 percent among children aged five to 10 years old and 10 to 19 years old, respectively.

Among Filipino adolescents, the number of overweight has tripled in the last 15 years. There is a higher rate of overweight and obese children in urban areas than in rural areas and higher prevalence of several risk factors and environmental conditions could rapidly increase the rates.

“The Department of Health recognizes the emerging problem of childhood overweight and obesity in the country and although its prevalence pales in comparison with that of undernutrition, it will be unfortunate to prejudice the public health attention it deserves to mitigate its future risk on non-communicable diseases, premature death and disability in adulthood,” Health Secretary Francisco T. Duque III said.

Further, Duque said, “the economic costs of this escalating problem are considerable both in terms of the enormous financial strains it will place on the health-care system and lost economic productivity.”

Start early

DR. Azucena Dayanghirang, Executive Director of the NNC, said that to prevent obesity, “we need to start early, that is in the first 1,000 days of life when we could also prevent undernutrition, which could also result in obesity in later life.”

She said that the NNC is leading the multisectoral Overweight and Obesity Management and Prevention Program of the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition 2017–2022. The PPAN targets no further increase in child obesity by 2022 by fostering a healthy food environment and promoting positive nutrition behaviors towards consumption of healthier diets.

For his part, Dr. Rabindra Abeyasinghe, WHO Representative in the Philippines, said that from a public health, economic and moral perspective, it is imperative for the government and the whole of society to act on this issue of childhood overweight and obesity.

“Curbing the childhood obesity epidemic requires political commitment at all levels, and the collaboration of many public and private stakeholders. A multisectoral approach is essential, and should provide supportive environments that encourage physical activity, restrict access to unhealthy foods and drinks, support mothers to practice exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months and to protect children from marketing influences. It is also important to ensure that policies and laws are fully implemented and protected from undue commercial interests,” he said.

Healthy, nutritious diet

MEANWHILE, Kati Tanninen, FAO Representative to the Philippines, said that maintaining a healthy and nutritious diet is especially important at this time of a pandemic.

“To promote and achieve healthy and nutritious diets, sustainable, functional and responsive food systems—borne out of collaborative and multisectoral action—are paramount,” she emphasized.

To this end, FAO is supporting the national government through the implementation of the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition 2017–2022, which calls on policies and programs to be “nutrition-sensitive.”

“Policy measures related to food systems that support healthy diets should be enforced. These policies and legislations should also be in line with—and guide the country’s actions towards—its pledges to global commitments such as the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–2025 and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly to SDG 2 on attaining Zero Hunger and improved nutrition for all. But more importantly, such legislations should be responsive to the country’s unique health and nutrition context, objectives, and priorities,” she added.

School policies

IN recent years, several legislations have been enacted by the Philippine Congress to support healthier diets and nutrition of Filipinos. The Department of Education has also issued policies on the sale of healthy foods and beverages in schools, as well as the promotion of physical activity.

“While there have been positive developments to enable an environment for better nutrition in the Philippines, there should also be a clear and prompt action to address the triple burden of malnutrition and to recognize childhood overweight and obesity as a central health issue. Aside from actively working with the Philippine Government and other partners to strengthen nutrition policies and plans, UNICEF also collaborates on generating evidence to better address overweight

and obesity and ensure access to healthy food for children. We remain committed to support health and nutrition initiatives for every child, especially the most vulnerable,” said Oyunsaikhan Dendevnorov, UNICEF Representative in the Philippines.

The DOH, NNC, FAO, WHO, and UNICEF jointly called for the firm and continuous enforcement of the existing legislations, and to introduce front of pack labelling of commercially produced foods, and to regulate harmful practices such as the marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

They also call on public to change the way overweight and obesity is viewed by society and become advocates for change for healthy food environments and policies that prioritize obesity as a serious health issue.