

India's Burden of Rising Obesity

Why in News?

Recently Prime Minister, in 'Mann Ki Baat' radio programme highlighted the alarming increase in obesity in the country.

What is the status of obesity in India?

- **Indian obesity** - The National Family Health Survey round 5 (NFHS-5, 2019-21) suggests that nearly one in every four men or women is obese.
- **Gender variation** - At the national level, Obesity has increased from 21% to 24% among women and 19% to 23% among men.
- **Childhood obesity** - The percentage of children under 5 who were overweight rose from 2.1% to 3.4% from 2015-16 to 2019-21, as per NFHS data.

ICMR Estimation on Indian obesity amongst adults over 20 years of age

- One in every third (35 crore) has abdominal obesity.
- One in every fourth person (25 crore) has generalised obesity.
- One in every fifth person (21 crore) has high levels of blood cholesterol.

- **Regional variation** - The proportion of those who are overweight and obese ranges from 8% to 50% across States, in both men and women, and in rural and urban settings.
- **Recent increase** - Overweight and obesity in adults and children have doubled in the last 15 years and tripled in the last three decades.
- **Forecast** - World Obesity Atlas 2022 estimates that India will have a child obesity prevalence of 10.81% amongst 5 to 9-year-olds and 6.23% amongst 10 to 19-year-olds by 2030.

What are the causes for the high prevalence of obesity in India?

- **Societal normalization** - The general societal attitude in India normalises obesity or being overweight.
- **Inadequate balanced diet** - 'State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World' report (2024), estimated that nearly 40% of Indians fall short of an adequate-nutrient diet.
- **High cost of health diet** - Eating healthy is becoming more expensive than eating junk food and that around 55% (78 crore) of India's population could not afford a healthy diet.
- **High fat, salt, sugar (HFSS)** - In the last two decades, easy and low-cost availability of high fat, salt, sugar (HFSS) and the ultra-processed food (UPF) has compounded the challenge.

- **Sedentary lifestyle** - A recent World Health Organization (WHO) report says that 50% of Indians fail to meet recommended physical activity levels driven by urbanization.
- **Lack of awareness** - Many people are not fully aware of the health risks associated with obesity and the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle

What are the impacts of obesity?

- **Health impact** - Obesity is often called the 'mother of all diseases' and affects the overall personal health.
- **Chronic disease** - WHO and the medical profession across the world have recognised that obesity is both a risk factor/lifestyle challenge and a complex and chronic disease.
- **NCD's risk** - Being overweight in childhood and adolescence, the WHO says, affects children's and adolescents' immediate health and is associated with greater risk and earlier onset of various NCDs.
- **Diabetes risk** - The 'common soil hypothesis' highlights obesity as a cause and risk factor for diabetes (one in every fourth Indian adult, or 25 crore Indians, is either diabetic or prediabetic).
- **Mortality** - Overweight and obesity are associated with an estimated 3.4 million deaths annually in the world.
- **Affects childhood development** - Obesity can also have adverse psychosocial consequences affecting school performance and quality of life, compounded by stigma, discrimination and bullying.
- **Economic cost** - The global obesity observatory estimates that the annual economic cost of obesity and being overweight in India in 2019 was \$28.95 billion (Rs.1,800 per capita), or 1.02% of India's GDP.
- These costs are linked to health-care expenditures and lost productivity, among others.
- **Increasing burden** - Without sufficient interventions, it is estimated that the economic burden is likely to increase to Rs.4,700 per capita by 2030 (or 1.57% of GDP).

What are the government measures in tackling obesity?

- India's Economic Survey 2024-25 takes note of obesity as an emerging health challenge, recommending higher taxation on UPF.
- **Public campaigns** - Programs like 'Khelo India', 'Fit India Movement' or 'Eat Right India' campaigns, promote physical activity and healthy lifestyle.
- **NCD control** - National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD) focuses on preventing and controlling NCDs, including obesity.
- **Adolescent health** - Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) addresses adolescent health by providing nutrition awareness and services to prevent NCDs like obesity.
- **Nutrition promotion** - POSHAN Abhiyaan Tackles malnutrition by addressing both undernutrition and overnutrition, including obesity.
- **Trans Fat regulation** - FSSAI limits trans fatty acids in oils and fats to $\leq 2\%$ by weight to reduce unhealthy fat consumption.

What are the deficiencies in these measure?

- **No dedicated program** - Unlike undernutrition, there are not enough programmatic initiatives to tackle obesity.
- **Underplayed responsibility** - Most initiatives place far too much of a responsibility on the individual, and the responsibility of most other stakeholders is underplayed.
- **Insufficient Screening** - Despite the growing prevalence of obesity, there is a lack of comprehensive public health measures such as screening, treatment, and awareness programs.
- **BMI Limitations** - Traditional measures like BMI often fail to capture obesity-related risks accurately, especially in Asian populations.

BMI does not indicate how much of the weight is fat and where the fat is distributed in the body.

- **Financial Constraints** - Limited financial resources and budget allocations restrict the ability to provide necessary equipment and facilities for obesity prevention initiatives

What can be done to address the issue?

- **Public awareness creation** - Start a societal dialogue, and a structured science communication to highlight that obesity is a disease with rising burden.
- **Management** - Obesity needs prevention, care and management, just like any other health condition.
- **Healthy ecosystem** - There needs to be better urban planning and urban infrastructure development with place for bicycle lanes, free access to parks and other public spaces and open gymnasiums.
- **Taxation** - Levy high tax rate for HFSS and UPF products and provide subsidies for healthier food items including fruits and vegetables and ensure their easy and widespread availability.
- **Health check ups** - The 'weight, height and waist circumference' measurement has to be an integral part of all health visits and preventive health check-ups.

A very generic but useful parameter to know one's ideal weight is the height in centimetre minus 100 for males and minus 105 for females.

- **Drugs and medicines** - Developing and widely disseminating clinical practice guidelines about the ideal candidates for anti-obesity medicines, which need to be used as per medical indication.
- **Occupational health** - Every office and workplace needs to raise awareness about 'unhealthy weight' in the workforce and make weighing scales easily available.
- **Incorporate nutrition education** - Curriculum should include lessons on balanced diets, the importance of various nutrients, and how to make healthier food choices.
- **Engage dietitians and nutritionists** - Following Japan's example, schools should

consider hiring dietitians to plan nutritious meals, provide dietary advice, and conduct workshops for students and staff.

- **Healthy school canteens** - Canteens should offer a variety of healthy food options, with a focus on fresh, local produce. Junk food should be limited or replaced with healthier alternatives.
- **Coordinated interventions** - Obesity prevention requires multiple ministry engagements (health, finance, education, agriculture, urban planning and development) to work together.
- **Wholistic approach** - India's nutrition intervention programme needs to be reimagined as 'Suposhan Abhiyan' with a focus on not just feeding but also 'mindful under-feeding' and 'rightful micronutrient supplementation'.

Reference

[The Hindu | India's burden of rising obesity](#)

[For Mains practice question , click here](#)

