

Confronting obesity in the Middle East

Rising per-capita income in the Middle East on the back of oil wealth has led to the adoption of a Western-style diet, laden with sugar, and a sedentary lifestyle. Across the Middle East, high temperatures limit outdoor activity. Meanwhile, studies suggest a genetic susceptibility to obesity among populations in the region. Combined, these factors have created an environment for an obesity epidemic in the region. Policymakers have been slow to address this issue, but some promising initiatives have been launched.

Prevalence of obesity

Primary causes:







A sedentary lifestyle with limited outdoor activity due to high temperatures

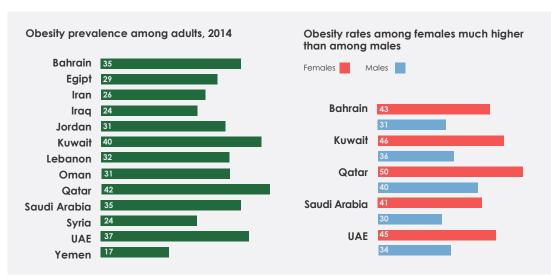


High consumption of sugar-sweetened and processed food



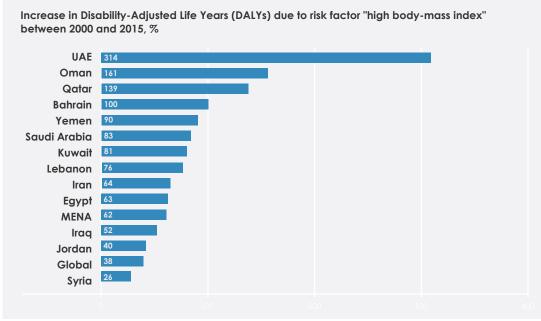
Genetic predisposition

The prevalence of obesity in the Middle East far surpasses the average in Europe (around 20%) and the US (34%). Obesity = body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more



Disease burden and socio-economic impact

Sharp increase in the region's disease burden due to obesity



McKinsey Global Institute estimates the economic burden of obesity in the UAE to be US\$6bn annually. Associated diseases, especially diabetes,

Spending on diabetes care reached US\$17.1bn in 2015 or 15% of total health expenditures in the

pose major **economic burden**:

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, highest proportional expenditure globally and well above the **global average of 11.6%**



of total health

MENA region



of total health

World

Governments are paying more attention to the obesity epidemic in the region and have addressed it in their long-term economic visions and plans.

Policy response in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia has committed UAE to reduce obesity levels

and road traffic accidents (National Transformation Program 2020) These have led to a host of programmes led by the public and private sector to combat obesity on all fronts:

over US\$400m up to 2020 to

tackle obesity, smoking



among children to 12% by 2021 (2021 Healthy Children)



Screening Diet

UAE's Weqaya programme to screen for various

risk factors, such as a high body mass index But major gaps remain. Experts recommend:

cardiovascular disease



Various Gulf countries,

such as Saudi Arabia, are exploring a 'sugar tax'

The UAE governments

have banned all junk food from school canteens.





A more integrated approach

involving nurse practitioners,

family physicians and social workers

Institute; The National; World Health Organisation





Creation of multidisciplinary teams to treat patients, i.e. specialists in obesity medicine and management, dieticians

and specialist psychologists



or taxes on unhealthy food

More aggressive regulatory

measures such as bans on the sale of **sugary drinks** in or near schools



Rethink health coverage to provide access to care for those who are already obese