

OBESITY: A RISING HEALTH ISSUE IN INDIA

NEWS: Obesity in India has become a **widespread and urgent health issue**, with **rising household-level clustering** and a strong link to cancer risk.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Definition and Classification of Obesity

- **WHO Definition:** The World Health Organization (WHO) defines obesity as **abnormal or excessive fat accumulation** that poses a **risk to health**.
- **BMI as a Metric:** Obesity is commonly measured using **Body Mass Index (BMI)**, which is calculated as:
$$\text{BMI} = \text{weight (kg)} / \text{height (m}^2\text{)}$$
- **Obesity Threshold:** A person with a **BMI of 30 or above** is classified as **obese**.
- **Overweight Definition:** Individuals with **BMI between 25 and 29.9** are considered **overweight**, indicating excess weight for their height but below obesity.
- **Normal BMI Range:** A BMI between **18.5 and 24.9** is regarded as **normal** and healthy.
- **Underweight Classification:** Individuals with **BMI less than 18.5** are classified as **underweight**, signifying insufficient body weight for optimal health.

Household-Level Obesity in India

- **National Patterns:** About **20% of Indian households** have all adult members overweight, while **10% of households** have all adults classified as obese.
- **State-level Clustering:** States such as **Tamil Nadu and Punjab** report **two in every five households** with all adults obese, indicating regional obesity hotspots.
- **Urban vs. Rural Divide:** Obesity clustering in **urban households** is **twice as high** as in rural areas, showing the influence of **urban lifestyles** and **dietary patterns**.

Global and Indian Obesity Trends

- **Global Childhood Obesity:** Among children aged 5–19 years, global obesity has risen from **2% in 1990** to **8% in 2022**.
- **Global Adult Obesity:** Adult obesity has increased from **7% to 16%** globally in the same period.
- **India-Specific (NFHS-5):**
 - **24% of women** and **23% of men** are overweight or obese.
 - **6.4% of women** and **4.0% of men** (aged 15–49) are classified as obese.
 - The percentage of **overweight children under 5** rose from **2.1% (NFHS-4)** to **3.4% (NFHS-5)**.

Cycle of Risk in Obese Households

- **Intergenerational Risk:** Obese adults often raise children in **environments with poor dietary norms and limited physical activity**, perpetuating a **cycle of obesity** and associated health risks.
- **Social Normalisation:** In such households, **unhealthy lifestyles become normalized**, making it difficult to reverse behaviours across generations.

Key Drivers of Rising Obesity in India

- **Dietary Transition:** Increased intake of **processed, high-calorie foods**, and sugary beverages.
- **Energy Imbalance:** A growing **gap between calorie intake and expenditure**, mainly due to sedentary behaviour.
- **Unhealthy Diets:** Common diets high in **fats, sugars, and ultra-processed items** are a major contributor.
- **Physical Inactivity:** Both urban and rural areas show **declining physical activity** levels due to mechanization and screen-based lifestyles.
- **Obesogenic Environments:** Lack of **access to healthy food options**, parks, and recreational spaces reinforces weight gain.
- **Behavioural Factors:** Stress, emotional eating, disrupted sleep patterns, and lack of awareness contribute to obesity.
- **Genetic Susceptibility:** Some individuals inherit genes that predispose them to **metabolic disorders or poor appetite regulation**.
- **Iatrogenic Causes:** Certain **medications or treatments** (like steroids or hormonal therapy) can lead to weight gain.

Implications of Obesity

1. Economic Implications

- **Double Burden:** India faces the **dual challenge** of **undernutrition** and rising obesity within the same population.
- **Projected Cost (Global Obesity Observatory):**
 - **₹6.7 lakh crore by 2030** (1.57% of GDP, ~₹4,700 per capita)
 - **₹69.6 lakh crore by 2060** (2.5% of GDP, ~₹44,200 per capita)
- **Economic Fallout:** Includes loss of productivity, job opportunities, and **increased healthcare costs**, coupled with the **emotional stress** of social stigma and reduced mobility.

2. Health Implications

- **Cancer Risk:** WHO's IARC links obesity to at least **13 types of cancers**, such as colorectal, postmenopausal breast, pancreatic, endometrial, and kidney cancer.
- **Comorbidity Complications:** A 2023 IARC study revealed that **high BMI combined with cardiovascular disease** increases cancer risk by **17%**.

- **US Data:** Excess body weight contributes to approximately **11% of cancers in women** and **5% in men**, underlining the global public health threat.

Government of India's Strategic Framework for Obesity Prevention

National Programmes and Institutions

- **NP-NCD:** The **National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases** focuses on obesity-linked diseases such as:
 - **Cardiovascular diseases (27%)**
 - **Cancers (9%)**
 - **Diabetes (3%)**
- **Ministry of AYUSH Initiatives:**
 - Offers **Ayurvedic treatments** for obesity at institutes like AIIA using **Panchakarma, diet therapy, and yoga practices.**

Public Campaigns

- **Fit India Movement (2019):** Aims to promote **daily physical activity** via:
 - School-level certification
 - Community engagement (e.g., **Fit India Sundays on Cycle**, mass yoga events)
- **Eat Right India Movement:**
 - Encourages **safe, sustainable, and nutritious diets** among citizens.
- **'Aaj Se Thoda Kam' Campaign by FSSAI:**
 - Motivates people to **reduce fat, sugar, and salt** intake gradually.
- **Front-of-Pack Labelling (FOPL):**
 - Mandates labels for **High Fat, Salt, Sugar (HFSS)** foods to enable **informed consumer choices.**

Healthcare Infrastructure Expansion

- **Day Care Cancer Centres:**
 - Plan to set up centres in **all district hospitals by 2027.**
 - **200 centres are expected** by 2025–26, integrating **prevention and screening** for obesity-related cancers.

Recommendations to Address Obesity

- **Expand NP-NCD Focus:**
 - Target **high-risk households** for lifestyle interventions and monitoring.
- **Geographic Prioritisation:**

- **Southern states, affluent households, and urban areas need tailored interventions.**
- **Policy and Regulatory Measures:**
 - Introduce **taxes on sugary beverages** and **HFSS foods** (like Kerala's 2016 "fat tax").
 - Enforce **advertising restrictions** on ultra-processed foods, especially to children.
- **Urban Design Reforms:**
 - Build **walkable cities** with parks, cycling lanes, and easy access to **fresh farm produce**.
- **Combat Sedentary Culture:**
 - Encourage **active lifestyles** through workspaces, schools, and public design that promotes movement.