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Obesity trends in Sub-Saharan Africa: What endanger its status?

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Background: The food system of the world is framed by globalization, liberalization and industrialization. While the benefits of a globalized food system are apparent, industrial food production, processing, trade, marketing and retailing are a major stressor to the planet and contribute to the nutrition and epidemiological transitions taking place in developing countries. In 2014, more than 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight and of these over 600 million were obese (WHO, 2015). WHO also indicates that the worldwide prevalence of obesity has doubled between 1980 and 2014. Once considered a high-income country problem, overweight and obesity are now on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan African countries and this status may be a signal of future vulnerability for Sub-Saharan African population. Even though there are numerous studies dedicated in prevalence of overweight/obesity and food pattern, there is no any research done that studies the shifting trend in food consumption particularly in Sub-Saharan African region during the past one and half decade.

Objective: To determine overweight and obesity prevalence trends in Sub-Saharan African and identify changes in calories intake and diet.

Methodology: An extensive literature review applying a descriptive documentary research design using quantitative approaches was done using existing secondary data retrieved by a computer based search from databases of PubMed, Medline, Google scholar and Google search engines produced in English language during 2000-2015, including source materials such as: the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) of Sub-Saharan Africa countries, World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, UNICEF and Scientific publications. Obesity and overweight are defined based on World Health Organization guidelines as BMI > 30 kg/m² and BMI >25 kg/m² respectively (WHO, 2015).

Results: Overweight trend increased from 3 to 10% in all Sub-Saharan African countries while obesity trend increased from 5 to 15%. South Africa had the highest increase in overweight and obesity. Inversely lowest rise in overweight and obesity was revealed in Eritrea. Remarkably, in the one and half decade, the highest variation in calorie intake was in South Africa (1200 kcal/day), while the lowest change was in Eritrea (120 kcal/day). Most of Sub-Saharan African countries increased the rate of sugar and wheat ingestion while they diminished their rate of rice intake.

Discussion: There are possible confounding factors that may have affected obesity such as gender, age, exercise, access to food availability and trade. Further study is required to address these contributing factors and consequence of globalization on diet intake.

Conclusion: overweight and obesity are in the rise in almost all Sub-Saharan African countries and might take epidemic proportions in the future. Like other public health challenges, they need to be prevented and reduced as planned in the WHO policy on diet and health.

Biography

Tesfai Yemane Nguse obtained his Bachelor of Science from Asmara College of Health Sciences, Eritrea in July 2010. He is currently pursuing Master's in International Master of Public Health in Global Health, Thammasat University, School of Global Studies, Thailand

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