

## INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION DIRECTORATE

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### **World Obesity Day 2024: AUC Joins WHO and UNICEF Campaign to halt spiralling overweight and obesity rates in Africa**

The African Union (AU) Commission joins the AU Member States and development partners worldwide to commemorate 2024 World Obesity Day under the theme “*Let’s Talk About Obesity and...*” endeavouring to be a part of the global response to the obesity crisis.

The AU Commission, WHO, and UNICEF have developed a communication campaign to raise awareness around the rise of obesity in children and adolescents on the African continent. Vital messages are being disseminated to all levels of society, providing updates on current trends in Africa, while emphasizing on the negative health implications.

Nearly one in every three of the world’s overweight children younger than age five live in Africa, while obesity rates among the continent’s children and adolescents aged five to 19 have doubled in the 16 years to 2022, heightening their risk of diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers. This alarming upward trend is worse for adults in Africa where overweight and obesity have nearly doubled in the six years to 2016.

Among children, being overweight is associated with a higher chance of obesity, premature death and disability in adulthood. Additionally, being obese or overweight raises the risks for cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, muscle and skeletal disorders, as well some types of cancer. The growing burden of obesity also overburdens health care systems unnecessarily, with many associated diseases requiring long-term care.

The African Union Commission (AUC) is joining efforts with WHO and the UNICEF to raise awareness around this reversible and preventable epidemic, focused primarily on the continent’s 10 worst-affected countries. These are Algeria, Botswana, Eswatini, Gabon, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mauritania, Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa according to WHO.

The AU Member States have endorsed policies to ensure a well-nourished population, and this is highlighted in AU Agenda 2063. Specifically, the [Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy](#) (2016-2025) aims to halt the increase of overweight in African children under five (5) years of age by 2025. This is further echoed by the Africa Health Strategy (2016-2030).

Beyond the policy landscape, the AU Commission advocates for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to develop and implement effective policies to strengthen food security in Africa: “Food market policies require collaboration between different sectors to promote nutritious foods and limit access to unhealthy products. We also need to strengthen health systems to provide obesity prevention and management services,” said H.E. Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, AU Commission.

“To combat obesity on the African continent, proactive measures are essential, including the need to urgently establish healthy and sustainable environments conducive to prolonged, healthier living. Given that young people are particularly susceptible to the influences of their surroundings. It is imperative to actively engage with them,” said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, Regional Director for WHO Africa.

Christiane Rudert, Regional Adviser Nutrition, UNICEF ESARO, stressed that obesity can be prevented, and needs to start with the very young: “UNICEF emphasizes that obesity is not the fault of individuals, but rather of the environments in which they live, learn and eat – food environments that fail to provide easy access to nutritious foods, instead promoting unhealthy food.”

“People are eating more highly processed foods that are high in sugar, energy, salt and unhealthy fats, but low in nutritional value. Physical inactivity is a second major risk factor, while there is also probably still a lingering perception that sees people associate overweight with wealth or prosperity,” cautioned Dr Adelheid Onyango, Director of the Universal Health Coverage/Healthier Population Cluster at the WHO Regional Office for Africa.

Historically, Africa’s obesity rates have been relatively low. However, factors including urbanization, more sedentary lifestyles and the adoption of fat-rich diets, combined with an absence of strong policies in key sectors, has changed the status quo. In collaboration with WHO, UNICEF, governments and other partners, the AU Commission aims to leverage its influence by advocating for legislative measures, resource allocation, and community awareness campaigns through mobilizing ministers, members of parliament, and champions to reverse the public health concern around obesity.

Click the link below to watch the joint message from the African Union, WHO and UNICEF:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPY76iif8L0>

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