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Challenges of Obesity & NCDs

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Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer, are the leading cause of death and disability worldwide, responsible for 41 million or 71% of global deaths each year.¹ Overweight and obesity, defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health, are major risk factors for a number of chronic NCDs, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and at least 12 types of cancer.² Recent research suggests that obese persons are up to 80 times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes³.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally with the prevalence of obesity in adults almost tripling worldwide between 1975 and 2016 to 52% and at least 2.8 million people dying each year as a result of being overweight/obese.⁴ On current trends, **2.7 billion** adults worldwide will be overweight and obese by 2025.⁵

Obesity in childhood often follows into adolescence and adulthood⁶, with an increased risk of developing NCDs.⁷ Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 are overweight/obese representing a dramatic rise from 4% in 1975 to over 18% in 2016.³ Only few countries have taken action to fight this damaging health issue that has lifelong consequences on health, educational attainment and quality of life.

Trends in NCDs and overweight /obesity in Jamaica

The main causes of death in Jamaica include heart disease, hypertension, cancer, diabetes, and stroke with 78% of all deaths (nearly 4 in 5) in Jamaica caused by NCDs.⁸ Currently, the Jamaican government spends more than US\$170 million each year on NCDs.

Once considered a problem only in high income countries, overweight and obesity are now dramatically on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in urban settings⁴ and Jamaica has followed this trend. The 2016-2017 Jamaica Health and Lifestyle Survey showed that one in two Jamaicans (54%) 15 years or older are overweight/obese including two thirds of Jamaican women.⁹ The overall overweight/obesity trend for adults is 45.7% in 2001; 51.7% in 2008 and 54% in 2016.⁹ Between 2010 and 2017, obesity in boys almost doubled from 5.3% to 10.3% (94% increase) and in girls increased from 6.7% to 9.9% (47% increase).¹⁰ These trends in both children and adults are astounding and clearly calls for bold and sustained corrective action.

Unhealthy diet: A risk factor for obesity

Jamaica, like the rest of the world has experienced a nutritional shift, in which diets have changed markedly from unprocessed or minimally processed foods to ultra-processed food: many of which have high levels of added sugars, salt, unhealthy fats, and low levels of dietary fibre.

This results in a diet that increases the risk of obesity and other diet-related NCDs.¹¹ Almost 8/10 Jamaicans consume fast foods more than once a day, 1 in 10 consumed excess salt at the table or frequently had salty sauces or high salt processed foods and only 1/3 of the populations reads food labels. 38 % consume vegetables at least twice per day and 26% consumed fruits 2 or more times per day.⁹

There is ongoing global concern regarding obesity stemming from the overconsumption of sugar and the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) is associated with an increased risk of obesity especially in children.⁷ Drinking just one sugary drink a day increases the likelihood of being overweight by 27% for adults and 55% for children.¹² The consumption of sugar in Jamaica's adolescents is among the highest in the world, with more than two thirds of Jamaican teens (13-17) consuming carbonated soft drinks one or more times per day.¹⁰ The WHO recommends limiting these nutrients of concern for the prevention of diet-related chronic diseases: limit free sugars to <10% of daily energy intake (approx. 12 teaspoons of sugar for adults., limit saturated fat to <10% of daily energy (approx. 13 g), limit salt intake to < 5g (approx. 1 teaspoon) per day¹³ and eliminate trans fat in the diet.¹⁴

We need to reduce and prevent obesity now and avoid the consequences later.

NCDs present a burden to Jamaica's healthcare system and economy with the Ministry of Health and Wellness currently spending 15% of its health budget on diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer. The NCD investment case for Jamaica projects that cardiovascular disease and diabetes could cost the country JMD\$77.15B over the next 15 years (2017-2032) because of direct and indirect costs.¹⁵ Overweight and obesity, as well as their related NCDs, are largely preventable. Supportive environments are fundamental in shaping people's choices, by making the choice of healthier foods the easiest choice³. Tackling our high rates of obesity and NCDs will therefore require a multifaceted approach and a menu of evidence-based, population-wide policy options to provide supportive environments, including:

- fiscal measures, front of package labelling,
- improvement of school food environments,
- restriction of the marketing of unhealthy foods to children¹⁶
- public education and improving access to and understanding of healthy foods and beverages.

Evidence from a growing number of countries, demonstrate that taxes on sugary drinks are effective in reducing sugary drink purchases, increasing water sales^{17,18} with no negative impact on total employment¹⁹. Reducing/restricting children's exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages high in fat, sugar, or sodium has been identified as a key strategy to curb childhood obesity by several global leaders including the World Health Organization, European Union, Pan American Health Organization and World Cancer Research Fund.^{20,21,22,23} Front of package (FOP) labelling – visible, accurate and easy to understand – helps children, young people and families make healthier food choices.²⁴ Current scientific evidence establishes the effectiveness of school-based interventions to change eating behavior and prevent overweight and obesity.¹⁷

Jamaica has committed to halt the rise of obesity and NCDs in keeping with its obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals and other national and International commitments. Commitment to action is demonstrated in the Ministry of Health's - National Strategic and Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in Jamaica 2013 – 2018²⁵, the National Operational Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Obesity in Children and Adolescents in Jamaica 2016 –2019²⁶ and the Food and Nutrition Security Policy, 2013²⁷. **With the implementation of the Interim Guidelines for Beverages in Schools in 2019 and the soon to be finalized National School Nutrition Policy, the government remains committed to improving the school food environment.** Reducing consumption of foods high in fats, salt and added sugars is one important and effective way to start to achieve this goal.

Governments, international partners, civil society, non-governmental organizations and the private sector all have vital roles to play in contributing to obesity and NCD prevention.

We applaud the Government of Jamaica and the Minister of Health and Wellness for his commitment to improving the health of the people of Jamaica by supporting the reduced consumption of foods high in unhealthy fat, salt and sugar in order to reduce the prevalence of obesity and NCDs.

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