

Concerted Actions for Tackling the Obesity Pandemic

With increasing accessibility of fast foods and other unhealthy foods, obesity prevalence has risen progressively and become a worldwide health and economic burden. It is imperative that governments and health professionals act to bring about changes in establishing a supportive environment to tackle this global health crisis.



Obesity around the world

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there were 1.5 billion adults aged 20 or above who were either overweight or obese in 2008. The pandemic contributes up to 41% of the cancer burden, 44% of the diabetes burden and 23% of the ischemic heart disease burden, and is the fifth leading cause of death, killing more than 2.8 million adults globally every year [1].

Neighbourhood environment and dietary behaviours

The fundamental cause of overweight and obesity is an imbalance between energy intake and energy expenditure. There has been a global increase in the intake of energy-dense foods, which tend to be high in fat, sugar and salt, over the past 3 decades. In the US, energy intake from soft drinks has increased dramatically by 228% between 1977 and 2002, and a similar trend has also been observed in fast food intake [2].

It is suggested that less healthy food environments are associated with poor dietary patterns and higher prevalence of obesity. A recent US study showed that the number of food outlets offering unhealthy food options near home and schools were associated with increased consumption of soft drinks and fast foods [2]. Adolescents living in or studying at schools in areas with a higher density of these food outlets were 17% and 18% more likely to consume soft drinks daily and have fast food at least twice a week respectively. Another American study showed that the energy consumed away from home increased from 23.4% in 1977 to 33.9% in 2006, and fast-food has become the largest contributor of energy intake from foods prepared away from home [3].

Similar findings were also observed in a local study [4]. Among the 24,800 adolescents surveyed, 60% or more reported the availability of fast-food shops, restaurants and 24-hour convenience stores within a 5-minute walking distance from home. It showed that adolescents were 10% more likely to consume soft drinks if there were fast-food shops or convenience stores near home. They were also at least 10% more likely to eat high-fat foods when fast-food shops and convenience stores were close by.

Create a supportive environment for public health

These two studies suggested that a supportive environment is important for facilitating individuals to make healthier food choices, which helps improve dietary behaviours and in turn, lowers the prevalence of obesity and other chronic diseases such as cancer [5]. Moreover, the physical activity pattern is also greatly affected by the built environments, such as the transportation system, availability of cycling paths, accessibility of free parks, and leisure and sports areas [5].

Urban planning, development and policy setting are crucial in bringing about environmental and societal changes for public

health. One of the successful examples of creating a supportive environment for healthy living through policy setting is the legislation limiting access to sugar-sweetened drinks in public schools in the US that has been in place since the early 2000s. It was found that the average amount of added sugar consumed has decreased significantly from 100.1g in 1999/2000 to 76.7g in 2007/08 ($p < 0.001$), and the percentage of energy intake from added sugar has also been lowered from 22.3% and 21.4% to 17.3% and 16.3% in adolescents and young adults respectively [6].

Achieving healthy patterns of diet and sustained physical activity requires concerted and integrated action from all sectors of society. The impact of policies and actions depends on successful interactions between all 'actor groups'.

While governments use legislation, pricing and other policies at all levels to promote healthy lifestyle patterns, WCRF HK and the WCRF global network, as civil society organizations, play a role in advocating and promoting options for sustainable policies and actions to ensure healthy food, nutrition, and physical activity for all in the prevention of obesity, cancer and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs). For example, in September, the WCRF global network was represented at the United Nation's Summit on NCDs to support the pressure on worldwide governments and key decision makers to create a health-promoting, cancer preventing environment. To learn more about what you, as a health professional, can do to help in the prevention of NCDs, please refer to the WCRF/AICR Policy Report *Policy and Action for Cancer Prevention* [5].



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UN Summit on Non-Communicable Diseases 19-20 September 2011, New York

In September, the United Nations General Assembly, for the first time ever, held a Summit on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), which brought world leaders and public health experts together to tackle the 36 million deaths caused by NCDs annually, representing 60% of all global deaths [1]. It is estimated that the number of global deaths caused by NCDs will further increase by 17% over the next 10 years [2].

The aim of this UN Summit was to bring Heads of States and other representatives from the UN together to agree on the commitments to tackle the growing burden of cancer and other NCDs including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases, and their shared risk factors. The last and only Summit of its kind was the 2001 General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, which helped set an agenda committed to reducing the incidence of HIV and AIDS, backed by financial resources, which led to a global decrease in the number of deaths caused by HIV/AIDS over the past decade [3].

The WCRF global network has been collaborating with the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) to ensure that cancer prevention is an important part of the Summit. The UICC is one of the four founding members of the NCD Alliance, which represents around 900 organisations in 170 countries who have an interest in the Summit. WCRF International has chaired the NCD Alliance on Nutrition, Physical Activity and NCD Prevention working group and has also launched an expert policy briefing paper to support global advocacy efforts on the NCDs, which sets out key recommendations for global and national actions to help reduce the rates of the major NCDs through having a healthy diet, being physically active and maintaining a healthy body weight [4].

At the UN Summit 2011, the NCD Alliance called for solid commitment to action in the following:

- Full implementation of the WHO 2008-13 Action Plan for the Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of NCDs; *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health*
- Reduction in consumption of saturated fat, trans-fat, salt and refined sugars
- Reduction of salt intake to less than 5g a day by 2025
- Trade and tax incentives to increase fruits and vegetables intake
- A reduction in childhood obesity by 2013
- Policies to encourage walking, cycling and active travel, play and leisure

To learn more about the UN NCD Summit and how the WCRF global network supported the Summit, please visit www.ncdalliance.org and www.wcrf.org

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1. NCD Alliance. NCD Alliance Briefing Paper: Nutrition, Physical Activity and NCD Prevention 2011. (http://www.wcrf.org/PDFs/Policy_Briefing_Paper.pdf) Accessed in August 2011
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WCRF International at the Asian Congress of Nutrition 13-16 July 2011, Singapore

WCRF HK was exhibiting and presenting, on behalf of WCRF International at the XI Asian Congress of Nutrition in Singapore from 13-16 July 2011.

Professor Junshi Chen (one of our WCRF/AICR Expert Panel members) from the Institute of Nutrition and Food Safety, Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Beijing, gave a presentation on “**Policy and Action for Cancer Prevention: Food, Nutrition and Physical Activity**”, on behalf of WCRF International. In the presentation, Prof. Chen shared with the delegates how different sectors can act together for cancer prevention, emphasising the importance of the leading roles that governments and health professionals should take for concerted actions for disease prevention.



Prof. Junshi Chen represented WCRF International at the Asian Congress on Nutrition to advocate for cancer prevention through a multi-sectorial approach



Delegates visited the WCRF International's exhibition booth after Prof. Chen's presentation to obtain further information on policy and action for cancer prevention.

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Newsletter copy review

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