

Obesity in India: Challenges and way forward

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INTRODUCTION

Obesity is a complex metabolic disorder characterized by excessive fat accumulation that can trigger many health issues in the long run. The global burden of obesity has tripled since the seventies. As of 2016, there were 1.9 billion overweight adults, of which 650 million were obese.¹ In the same year, 135 million individuals were affected by obesity in India.² It is projected that the prevalence of obesity in India will triple by 2040. Importantly, the prevalence of obesity in India by 2040 will be 9.5% in men and 13.9% in women.³ Therefore, the obesity scourge can be considered to be a “ticking time bomb,” ready to explode at any moment and will impact large populations across all age groups in both rural and urban areas.

India-specific Challenges

Some of the challenges faced by people the world over are also applicable for India. These include a sedentary lifestyle, lack of exercise, and consumption of an unhealthy diet. Additionally, the tendency to consume fast food is increasing in India, especially among the new generation. Street food is also popular in India despite being often unhygienic or containing harmful ingredients. These trends have been influenced by the economic transition that India has been undergoing over the past few decades due to the adoption of an open economy model.

The epidemiological pattern of disease burden and deaths have been changing since 1990 and has been characterized by a steady increase in the burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCD). A landmark study called the Lancet Global Burden of Disease Study (2016)⁴ revealed that 61.8% of all deaths were due to NCDs, while 27.5% were due to communicable diseases. This has resulted in a squabble between the advocates of communicable diseases (TB, malaria, HIV/AIDS) with those of NCDs (cardiovascular diseases and diabetes) on which of the two should get precedence with regard to the allotment of resources. Coping with this tussle has been really challenging for the Indian health system.⁵

Another challenge is that obesity in general and normal-weight obesity in particular is grossly under-recognized in India. In case of normal-weight obesity, an individual can be obese despite having a normal body weight (BMI: 18.5–24.9 kg/m²). Notably, this type of obesity can significantly increase the risk of death from heart attack or stroke. It can also cause hypertension and dyslipidemia.⁶

Similarly, Indian data on obesity awareness is scanty and the

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few studies that have been conducted are inconclusive,^{7,8} while one study has indicated that awareness is low in certain groups.⁹

Existing Policy Programs

There are several programs run by the Indian government. These include the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (RMNCH + A) Program,¹⁰ the *Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram* (RBSK; National Child Health Program),¹¹ the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme,¹² as well as the School Health and Wellness Program.¹³ All these programs are very ambitious and are directed towards the improvement of the health and wellbeing of children and in some cases, also that of mothers, newborns and adolescents (RMNCH + A Program). The major thrust areas in case of children include nutrition (through mid-day meals in schools) and physical, mental and social development. It also includes screening for congenital defects, deficiency disorders, developmental delays, and disabilities. Others include immunization, micronutrient supplementation, and de-worming drives. In the case of adolescents, these cover depression, substance abuse, mental health, reproductive health, injuries and violence (including gender-based violence), among several others. The RBSK program includes NCDs in the adolescent health category. Unfortunately, there is no mention of obesity. There are some other related government programs in India, including the National Program for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS),¹⁴ Mothers Absolute Affection (MAA) Program,¹⁵ and the National Nutrition Mission (NNM).¹⁶ But here also, obesity is not emphasized.

The Way Forward

There are several strategies that can be adopted to address the challenges. Policymakers should be sensitized about

the impending obesity epidemic in India. Greater political will is the need of the hour. Coordination, hand-holding, and capacity building between the various stakeholders, including both the public and private sectors, is required. There is a need to ensure that fragmentation of work does not occur. Mothers' education in family health is also important so that they become aware of basic hygiene, nutrition, and their children's general wellbeing. Coupled with this, they should be informed about the detrimental effects of overnutrition on health and the dangers of obesity. Dietary guidelines for preventing and managing NCDs, including obesity, are available in the medical literature,¹⁷ which family physicians can utilize to educate their patients.

In India, the primary healthcare system mainly focuses on health conditions due to undernutrition, and rightly so, as the majority of Indian children are malnourished. However, the time has come to pay some attention to the detrimental effects of overnutrition, which is largely responsible for conditions like obesity in children and adolescents and later in adulthood. Ending on an optimistic note, the One Health approach, spearheaded by the One Health Initiative Taskforce, has included obesity as one of its priorities.¹⁸ Moreover, since the Indian government recently launched the One Health Consortium,¹⁹ there is still hope to stop this silent epidemic.

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