

Childhood Obesity Levels to Soar by 2010



The rate of childhood obesity is forecast to increase dramatically worldwide over the next few years, according to the International Association for the Study of Obesity (IASO).

By 2010, an estimated 26 million children in the European Union (EU) will be overweight; 6.4 million being obese. According to an IASO report, the proportion of school-age children affected will almost double by the end of this decade compared with the most recently available surveys from the late 1990s to 2003 (Table 1). In the EU, an additional 1.3 million children each year will be overweight — more than 300,000 who will become obese — without urgent action to counteract the trend.

Researchers suggest that, based on the most conservative estimates, >20,000 obese children in the EU already have type 2 diabetes and >400,000 have impaired glucose tolerance. More than 1 million obese children probably show signs of cardiovascular disease such as hypertension and hyperlipidemia, as well as components of metabolic syndrome. More than 1.4 million may have early stages of liver disorder.

Predictions are that the proportion of obese children in Europe will reach 10% — almost double what was reported in earlier surveys. The figure is even higher in the Middle East, and in both North and South America, the average level of obesity in children is forecast to reach 15.2%.

In a news release, Professor Philip James, chairman of the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), said the study provided “evidence that the rapidly worsening problem of childhood obesity is not confined to Europe or the Western world but, to major economically developing countries.

“We may well be markedly underestimating the morbidity relating to this problem in Europe, but even these figures for associated comorbidities may still underestimate the problems found elsewhere,” he added.

Tim Lobstein, FRCP, coordinator of IOTF's childhood and adolescent obesity research program, said analysis of worldwide trends he undertook with Youfa Wang, MD, PhD, of the department of international health at Johns Hopkins University, showed how widespread the problem has become.

“Obesity estimates are cautious, but extremely worrying. When we looked at overweight [children] it was astonishing to see that nearly half of children in both North and South America could be overweight in 4 years. In Europe we are seeing substantial increases with overweight at 38% — up 60% on the level we saw throughout the late 1990s.

“Added to this our estimate of 1 million children affected by cardiometabolic risk factors should be ringing alarm bells. In the United States, the figure is 2 million — doubled from 1 million a decade ago. This reinforces the need for immediate and urgent action to protect our children and stop this runaway trend. We can only do this if we address the need to cut down consumption of empty calories . . . and do more to improve children's opportunities to be active,” Dr. Lobstein said. ■

Wang Y, Lobstein T. Worldwide trends in childhood overweight and obesity. *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity*. 2006 1: 11-25

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TABLE 1. OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY AMONG SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN BY GLOBAL REGION

WHO Region (most recent surveys)	Most recent surveys		Projected 2006		Projected 2010	
	Overweight % (incl obesity)	Obesity %	Overweight % (incl obesity)	Obesity %	Overweight % (incl obesity)	Obesity %
Africa (1987-2003)	1.6	0.2	*	*	*	*
Americas (1988-2002)	27.7	9.6	40.0	13.2	46.4	15.2
Eastern Med (1992-2001)	23.5	5.9	35.3	9.4	41.7	11.5
Europe (1992-2003)	25.5	5.4	31.8	7.9	38.2	10.0
South East Asia (1997-2002)	10.6	1.5	16.6	3.3	22.9	5.3
West Pacific (1993-2000)	12.0	2.3	20.8	5.0	27.2	7.0

* Prevalence of overweight and obesity in school-age children (defined using the IOTF international childhood BMI cut-offs that relate to the agreed WHO BMI standards for adults). Estimated for 2006 and 2010 based on population-weighted annualized increases in prevalence.