

Proportion of overweight and obese males and females to increase in most European countries by 2030, say latest projections by WHO

Embargo 0001H Prague local time Wednesday 6 May

Europe will face an obesity crisis of enormous proportions by 2030, according to latest projections released by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO) at this year's European Congress on Obesity (ECO) in Prague, Czech Republic. The projections are the work of Dr Laura Webber, UK Health Forum, London, UK, and Dr Joao Breda, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark, and colleagues. These unpublished estimates form part of the WHO Modelling Obesity Project together which was undertaken with UK Health Forum, as part of a collaboration between WHO Regional Office for Europe and the European Commission.

The latest projections look at data from all 53 countries of the WHO European region, and compare the proportions of overweight (body mass index [BMI] over 25kg/m²) and obesity (BMI over 30 kg/m²) for both males and females in 2010 with projected 2030 levels where the quality of the projections depends on the availability and quality of national level data. The data highlight a serious problem for many countries.

By 2030, almost all Irish adults are projected to be overweight. For men, 91% are likely to be overweight (which includes obese)*, and 27% are estimated to be obese by 2030, compared with 76% and 24% respectively in 2010. For women, 83% are likely to be overweight, and 57% obese in 2030, compared with 56% and 23% in 2010, respectively

In the UK, one third (33%) of women are forecast to be obese in 2030, compared with over one quarter (26%) in 2010. 63% of women will be overweight in 2030, compared with 59% in 2010. For men, almost three quarters (73%) will be overweight in 2030 compared with 70% in 2010, while 36% of UK men will be obese in 2030 compared with 26% in 2010.

Other countries with projected steep rises in obesity over this period include Greece, Spain, Sweden, Austria, and the Czech Republic. An estimated 77% of Greek men is forecast to be overweight by 2030 compared to 66% in 2010, while the proportion of obese Greek men will more than double from 20% to 44% over the same period. Greek women will likely see similar increases—67% of Greek women will be overweight in 2030, up from 53% in 2010. The proportion of obese women in Greece will likely double from 20% in 2010 to 40% in 2030.

For Spain, obesity in women is projected to increase from 16% in 2010 to 21% in 2030. In men, the rise will be much steeper, from 19% in 2010 to 36% in 2030. Even in countries with traditionally lower prevalence of obesity such as Sweden, obesity rates are predicted to rise sharply. An estimated 26% of Swedish men will be obese by 2030, compared to 14% in 2010, while for women the proportion of obesity will increase from 12% to 22%. Czech Republic - host to this year's ECO conference - is also likely to see a sharp increase, with more than one in three women (37%) obese in 2030 compared with less than one in four (23%) in 2010. For men, the data are almost as worrying, with obesity likely to increase from 22% to 36% obese over these 20 years.

Few countries in the WHO region will see stable or decreasing overweight and obesity rates. The Netherlands, however, appears to be likely to be doing better than many other countries. Less than half of Dutch men (49%) are predicted to be overweight, and just 8% obese, by 2030, compared with 54% and 10% in 2010. For Dutch women, the proportion of overweight will remain more or less stable over the 20 years (43% 2030 and 44% in 2010). However the obesity rate in Dutch women is predicted to fall from 13% to 9% during this period.

Overall, the data show no evidence of a plateau in adult obesity in most countries. A wide cross section of countries appear to be likely to see significant rises in their proportions of overweight and obese adults.

Dr Breda says: “Although this was a forecasting exercise, and therefore data needs to be interpreted with caution, it conveys two strong messages—first that the availability and quality of the data in countries needs to be improved, and second these predictions show that more needs to be done in terms of preventing and tackling overweight and obesity.”

Dr Webber says: “Our study presents a worrying picture of rising obesity across Europe. Policies to reverse this trend are urgently needed. Although there is no ‘silver bullet’ for tackling the epidemic, governments must do more to restrict unhealthy food marketing and make healthy food more affordable. There are also some countries in which there were insufficient data. As these countries improve their obesity surveillance, more accurate estimates can be forecast.”

Note to editors: *in the explanations above, overweight means all people with a BMI over 25, which includes overweight (BMI over 25) and obese (BMI over 30). Obese means just those people with a BMI of over 30

Dr Joao Breda, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark. T) +45 45 33 67 25 / mobile: + 45 30 50 80 22 E) JBR@euro.who.int

Alternative contact for Dr Breda: Tina Kiaer, Communications Officer, Division of Noncommunicable Diseases and Life-Course WHO/Europe T) +45 4533 6740 E) tki@who.euro.int

Dr Laura Webber, UK Health Forum, London, UK. T) +44 (0) 20 7832 6935 E) Laura.Webber@ukhealthforum.org.uk

Alternative Tony Kirby of Tony Kirby PR Ltd. T) +44 7834 385827 E) tony@tonykirby.com