



World Health Organisation

Topic: The Obesity Epidemic

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Dear Delegates,

I would like to thank you for deciding to take part in this conference and hope you will enjoy your experience with the WHO council. My name is Nikhil Jethwani, and I am going to be the director for this year. I am an international student from Dubai and am a Preferred-Admit to the Ross School of Business. I am planning to concentrate in either finance or entrepreneurship.

Having attended two MUN conferences in the past, I realize that preparation for the debate takes a significant amount of time and effort. Yet that same hard work put in yields results and leads to some very engaging discussions. For the forum to be successful, I expect all of to not only read this background guide, but also research further to truly comprehend the nature of the issue at hand.

During the conference we will be discussing ways to curb obesity, with a specific emphasis on countries such as the United States, South Africa and Mexico, where obesity is especially prevalent. I chose this topic because over 1.5 billion people in the world are overweight, 500 million of which are also considered obese. With average daily consumption of calories increasing, the obesity rate has been rising precipitously, and this has had a significant impact on the quality of life of the people involved.

If you have any questions feel free to email me.

Looking forward to meeting you during the conference,

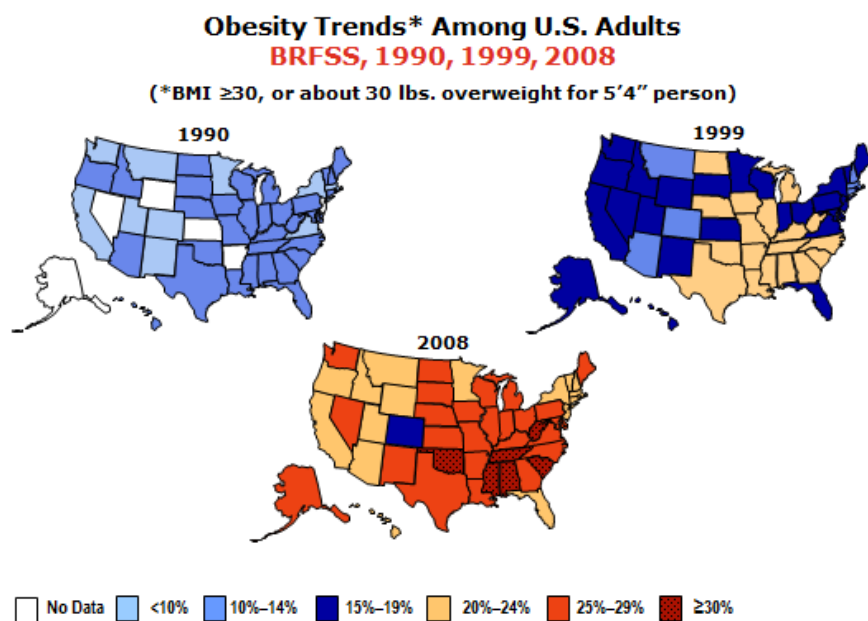
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nikhil Jethwani" followed by an exclamation point. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Regards,

Nikhil Jethwani

Why is obesity a concern?

On an average people consume 400 calories more per day than they used to 30 years ago. The problems caused by this increase are exacerbated by the fact that food consumed today is less nutritious than it used to be in the past. For instance, about a quarter of all calorie intake is from fruit juices and sodas, which have marginal nutritional value. Decrease in exercise is also another causative factor of the increase in obesity. Due to the lifestyles of people being less physically demanding, they burn fewer calories, which increases the net amount of calories consumed. Certain countries, such as the United States, have been affected more by the obesity epidemic, as can be seen by the charts below.



The problem is expected to worsen in the future, and by 2015 forecasts suggest that 700 million people will have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of over 30 (the point at which a person is classified as obese) globally.

Being obese causes a myriad of problems for people. Obesity increases the chance of having cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders and some forms of cancer. Studies have indicated that having a BMI of over 21 can increase the risk of chronic disease, so for people with levels above 30 these risks are compounded. The problems raised by poor diet causes 365,000 deaths a year in the United States alone, which is second only to the number of deaths caused by use of tobacco. Obesity is also one of the major reasons why researchers have predicted that for the first time ever, this generation will have a lower life expectancy than the previous generation.

What is required and action by the WHO

Over 50% of the adults do not meet the requirement of 2.5 hours of exercise a week, with 22% not exerting themselves physically at all. Exercise has to be promoted amongst the people because changing from low to moderate levels of activity will cause the greatest gain in life expectancy.

Dietary habits have to change as well. Schools would have to educate children more on maintaining a balanced diet, and cafeterias would have to improve the quality of food. Additionally, due to food portions increasing at restaurants, people would have to adjust their eating habits accordingly to make sure they do not exceed the recommended amount of calorie intake in a day.

Contrary to popular belief, short term diet plans are highly ineffective. Americans spend approximately \$40 billion on diet plans and supplements, and most of those people return to their original weight within 3-5 years.

The 2004 WHO Global Strategy on Diet goes into more detail on what is required to make the necessary changes. One of the branches of the WHO is the Department of Chronic Diseases and Health Promotion, which aims to: advocate for health promotion and chronic disease prevention and control; promote health, especially for poor and disadvantaged populations; slow and reverse the adverse trends in the common chronic disease risk factors; and prevent premature deaths and avoidable disability due to major chronic diseases. Their work is complemented by Department of Nutrition for Health and Development, who have a specific focus on promoting healthy eating in developing countries, and aiming to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

Barriers to action

The major barriers in making many of the changes are economic. Many large corporations would be affected if people start consuming less food, so in effort to protect their profits they try to ensure that not many policies are passed that would reduce food consumption significantly.

These companies raise numerous counterarguments, the first of which is that it is a person's own responsibility to monitor what they eat and in what quantities. They also find faults in many of the studies conducted by the CDC and the WHO, to try and negate the findings and suggest that there is no causation between poor health and obesity.

Other problems are political. Tax fund allocations are very controversial, so finding the money to fund programs to help with obesity is often difficult because other may believe that the money may be put to better use elsewhere.

Questions to consider

- 1) How beneficial would combatting obesity be, especially for developing countries?
- 2) What changes need to be made to the current strategies being implemented?
- 3) What programs have been initiated by the country you are representing? How do these programs complement some of the global initiatives?
- 4) Is it “right” to make decisions for the people and control what food is available to them?
- 5) How could MNCs with large amounts of political powers be convinced when trying to suggest certain policies?

Useful places to start research

- <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs311/en/>
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0004552/>
- <http://www.nytimes.com/info/obesity/>