Comment: Obesity, COVID-19 and policy implications

Leading obesity-specialists have today (04/06/2020) published an open letter to Dr Tedros, WHO Director General, calling for increased recognition of the links between obesity and COVID-19 complications and asking for obesity to be included in technical guidance and other materials published by WHO.

Evidence shows that obesity is one of the leading pre-existing conditions, alongside a number of other NCDs, which increases the risk of COVID-19 complications. As a result of COVID-19, we are also seeing a detrimental impact on the provision of health services and care for people living with obesity. Furthermore, there is concern about the impact that the pandemic is having on the health of the general population and the risk of worsening obesity due to changing diets, reduced opportunities for physical activity and the impact on mental health, especially in vulnerable and low-income households.

Given that all countries are off track to meeting global obesity targets, the absence of obesity in the draft WHA resolution on the COVID-19 response is a missed opportunity to recognise the implications that obesity has on health and for reinforcing commitment to action as part of COVID-19 responses. In our statement to the WHA we called on Member States to recognise that obesity is a disease which poses an increased risk of COVID-19 complications and to ensure that people living with obesity have access to the health services they need. Furthermore, we called for national responses to COVID-19 to integrate treatment and prevention for obesity and other NCDs in the short term and long term, including those which ensure equitable access to nutritionally adequate food, support physical activity and promote good mental health. Actions like these can help to reduce the burden on health systems, help to avert longer term health crises and support resilience to this and future pandemics.

We are starting to see increasing recognition by governments of the links between obesity and COVID-19, with people living with obesity recognised as being more vulnerable in UK, France and Mexico. In France, employment and salary protections have been put into place for people living with obesity who may be unable to work during the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK Prime Minister’s recently made a statement recognising that the country’s high rates of obesity may be a factor contributing to the high COVID-19 mortality, committing to deliver more interventions to address obesity, building on the commitments already made as part of the Childhood Obesity Plan. Some of these examples were discussed in a recent World Obesity webinar on this topic.

The link between obesity and COVID-19 complications should be seen as a stark warning of the risks of inaction. Now, more than ever, we must look implement strong comprehensive policies to reduce obesity globally and protect people living with obesity. A key part of this is recognising that obesity is both a disease and a risk factor, and ensuring that it is addressed as part of NCD efforts accordingly. Obesity is a complex condition which has many underlying drivers, including environmental, psychological, genetic, societal and commercial drivers. A package of interventions will be required to address all the different manifestations of obesity around the world. To mark World Obesity Day earlier this year, World Obesity published a Declaration on Obesity with a number of other organisations around the world, highlighting the range of actions that are needed to address the roots of obesity, accompanied by a menu of policy options for governments to address obesity at a national level.
The Declaration called on governments to:

- Recognise officially that obesity is a chronic, multifactorial disease as a driver of other diseases, with serious implications for individuals, families, societies and economies.
- Obesity monitoring and surveillance, and innovative research into the causes and effective strategies for preventing and treating obesity, must be vigorously promoted and supported.
- Obesity prevention strategies must be developed, tested and implemented across the life course, from pre-conception, through childhood and into older age.
- Treatment of obesity, using evidence-based, dignified, non-stigmatising and person-centred approaches – including behavioural, pharmacological, digital, nutritional, physical-activity based and surgical interventions – should be accessible to all people with obesity.
- Systems-based approaches should be applied to the management of obesity, aimed at strengthening health systems, enabling obesity’s incorporation into primary and secondary care, and addressing the environmental, social and commercial roots of obesity.

Implementing strong policies to protect people living with obesity, prevent further case of obesity and reduce global obesity rates, is a vital step for reducing the burden of COVID-19 on health services and building strong, resilient populations. Comprehensive action as part of COVID-19 responses and wider health policy is urgently needed.

For more information on the links between COVID-19 and obesity, and the work that World Obesity is doing on this issue, visit our newly launched dossier.