



Barriers to physical activity are limiting progress on obesity, warns World Obesity Federation

PRESS RELEASE

Barriers to physical activity are limiting progress on obesity, new statement warns

London, [6 April] – A new position statement from the World Obesity Federation highlights the critical role of physical activity in both preventing and managing obesity, while calling for stronger action to address the systemic barriers that limit people's ability to be active.

Published today, World Physical Activity Day, in *Obesity Reviews*, the paper – "*The Role of Physical Activity in the Prevention and Management of Obesity*" – brings together the latest evidence and global guidance to outline how physical activity can promote health across the life course, and why it must be embedded within broader systems of care.

Obesity is a complex, chronic disease shaped by biological, environmental and societal factors. While physical activity is a key component of both prevention and care, the authors emphasise that individual behaviour change alone is not enough. Access to safe environments, supportive policies, and inclusive opportunities for movement are essential to enable people to be active.

Globally, levels of physical inactivity are rising, with more than 30% of adults not meeting recommended activity levels. Without stronger, coordinated action, the world is unlikely to meet global targets to reduce inactivity by 2030.

Physical activity delivers wide-ranging health benefits

The statement highlights that physical activity supports a wide range of health outcomes, including improved cardiovascular and metabolic health, better mental wellbeing, and reduced risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). For people living with obesity, it also plays an important role in improving physical function, quality of life, and long-term health outcomes.

However, the paper also makes clear that physical activity should not be viewed through a narrow lens of weight alone. Sustainable progress requires coordinated, multisectoral approaches that address the environments and systems shaping health.

Supporting comprehensive, person-centred care

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The publication comes at a time of growing global attention on new obesity treatments, including GLP-1 receptor agonist medications. While these therapies represent an important advance, the authors stress that they must be delivered as part of comprehensive, person-centred care.

Approaches that combine medical treatment with physical activity and nutrition support are essential to support long-term health and wellbeing.

A call for systems-based approaches

The World Obesity Federation is calling on governments and policymakers to take a whole-of-society approach to increasing physical activity. This will require deliberate policy choices to move beyond car-dependent, inequitable systems and make movement part of everyday life.

- **Rebalancing transport investment** towards walking, cycling, recreation, and active travel infrastructure, rather than continued reliance on car-centric planning
- **Embedding physical activity within health systems**, including routine support in primary and community care rather than treating it as an optional add-on
- **Aligning urban planning, transport and education policies** to make physical activity an integrated part of daily life across the life course
- **Targeting inequalities directly**, by prioritising safe, affordable opportunities for physical activity in underserved and marginalised communities

The paper also highlights the links between physical inactivity, obesity and climate change, pointing to the potential for policies (such as active transport and urban design) to deliver co-benefits for both human and planetary health.

Quotes

Johanna Ralston, CEO, World Obesity Federation, said:

“Physical activity is fundamental to both preventing and managing obesity, but it does not exist in a vacuum. People’s ability to be active is shaped by the environments they live in, the systems that support them, and the opportunities available to them. We must move beyond outdated narratives of individual responsibility and instead invest in policies and systems that make physical activity accessible, inclusive and achievable for all.”

Kent Buse, Professor of Health Policy, Monash University Malaysia; Chair of the Policy and Prevention Committee, World Obesity Federation, said:

‘Let’s be honest: people are not failing to be active; rather systems are failing them. Inactivity has been deliberately engineered into our cities, our economies, and our daily lives, while responsibility is shifted

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onto individuals. Until governments confront the commercial, political and urban systems that constrain movement, progress on obesity will remain performative rather than real.'

Dr Angie Jackson-Morris, Director of Programme Development and Strategy, World Obesity Federation (co-author of the paper) said:

"Improving health outcomes for people living with obesity requires more than a focus on weight alone. Movement plays a critical role in promoting cardiovascular, metabolic, musculoskeletal, and mental health, and should be embedded in prevention strategies and clinical care. To make this a reality, we need coordinated action to remove barriers and ensure opportunities to be active are accessible and inclusive for all."

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The paper, *"The Role of Physical Activity in the Prevention and Management of Obesity: A Position Statement From the World Obesity Federation,"* is published in [Obesity Reviews](#). A PDF copy is attached to this email.
- On 31 March, the World Obesity Federation published a [joint statement](#) with leading health and fitness organisations, calling for physical activity and nutrition to be integrated into systems supporting the global roll-out of obesity medications, including GLP-1 therapies. The joint statement emphasises that while new treatments represent an important advance in obesity care, long-term health outcomes depend on access to comprehensive, person-centred support - including physical activity and nutrition - within well-designed health systems.

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About World Obesity Federation

The World Obesity Federation (World Obesity) is the only global organisation focused exclusively on obesity.

[World Obesity](#) represents stakeholders in high-, medium- and low-income countries, including experts, advocates, patients and practitioners. It is a lead partner to global agencies on obesity, including the World Health Organization (WHO) – with which it has formal consultative status. The World Obesity Federation takes a holistic view of obesity from cause and prevention to treatment.

World Obesity Federation strongly encourages journalists and editors to use [people-first language](#) and respectful images when reporting on obesity and overweight.

Access to images:

The World Obesity Federation [Image Bank](#) is a gallery of free-to-use images that are accurate, non-biased and respectful.

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