



4 March 2020: World Obesity Day

Obesity is not a choice, it's a complex health condition that is difficult to treat. We acknowledge that it's not under our control and we need to work together.

45 years ago an overweight child was a rarity, less than 1 in a hundred. Today, 30% of South African girls are overweight or obese. More than half of South African adults are overweight. How have we changed so drastically in a relatively short time?

Medical science now recognizes obesity as a disease condition, one that leads to many other diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and joint disease. A disease that causes emotional suffering and robs people of opportunities. No one should be ashamed of being overweight. No one should be stigmatized or discriminated against based on their weight. We should take collective responsibility and seek solutions together.

'the root causes of obesity run much deeper'

The first step is to understand obesity. Worldobesityday.org, a coalition of global obesity organizations, explains that "people with obesity are constantly shamed and blamed for their disease. This is because many people do not understand that obesity is a chronic disease. They see it as a simple lack of willpower, laziness, or a refusal to 'eat less and move more'. But like all chronic diseases, the root causes of obesity run much deeper".

The complex causes of obesity can be genetic, psychological, sociocultural, economic and environmental. We live in an *obesogenic* environment where it's so easy to become overweight that it is becoming the norm rather than the exception. What does this obesogenic environment look like? Unhealthy foods are constantly in your face, whether at supermarket tills, on your phone or billboards. Where you live and work makes exercise or walking to work difficult if not unsafe. Your culture expects you to be voluptuous, or friends mock you for eating healthy food. Healthier foods are more expensive than moreish junk food. You are constantly rushing and take-outs are easier than cooking. You sit in front of a desk, a till or a steering wheel for hours every day.

We have no control over some of the biological factors that promote obesity. Poor nutrition when you were a child, even as an unborn baby, make you more likely to be overweight later in life. When you grow up facing hunger, your body is primed for a lifetime of famine and less equipped to deal with an

onslaught of unhealthy food. Not being breastfed, overweight parents, or emotional connections with food, all have a lifelong impact.

'It is time we break the cycle of shame and blame'

Beating obesity requires comprehensive action to make our world healthier. Globally, countries have set a target to halt the rise in obesity, aiming for a 0% increase in obesity between 2010 and 2025. South Africa's probability of meeting this global target is less than 1%. Clearly, obesity prevention and treatment need to be reprioritised.

Worldobesityday.org states, 'It is time we break the cycle of shame and blame and reevaluate our approach for addressing this complex chronic disease that affects 650 million people worldwide'. We need to hold each other, industries, and governments accountable. All the global partners, which includes the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, have formulated an obesity declaration which highlights five key strategies to address obesity, using the acronym ROOTS. The five strategies are summarised as Recognizing obesity, Obesity monitoring, Obesity Prevention, Treatment for obesity, and Systems-based approaches. The ROOTS declaration will propose a menu of 100 options for policymakers to address obesity more effectively.

Start the conversation

Where do we start? Recognize that obesity affects your life and that you don't have complete control. Push together for more comprehensive solutions, treatment and collective responsibility. Every person with obesity has the right to respectful treatment and support. Speak up against an obesogenic environment. Start the conversation, become a #ForceForChange #SpeakAboutObesity #worldobesityday

Knowing that obesity is not your 'fault' can equally be empowering. Professor Pamela Naidoo, CEO of The Heart and Stroke Foundation adds "Understanding your environment and the causes of obesity can help us to adapt and make lifestyle changes despite these challenges that we face. We encourage people to seek out opportunities to live healthier, increase activity levels and eat better. We will continue to work towards a healthier environment for all South Africans."