



# Global dietary changes threaten health

[www.worldheart.org](http://www.worldheart.org)

UNHEALTHY DIET

## Unhealthy diet kills

- Unhealthy diets are linked to four of the world's top ten leading risk factors causing death: high blood pressure, high blood glucose, overweight and obesity and high cholesterol.
- Inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and some cancers and accounts for some 1.7 million deaths a year.
- Dietary salt consumption is an important determinant of blood pressure levels and of overall cardiovascular risk; high blood pressure is the number one risk factor for death around the world.
- High consumption of saturated fat and trans-fats is linked to heart disease, the number one cause of death globally.

## Dietary trends threaten health in low- and middle-income countries

- In low-income countries, unhealthy diet is linked to three of the top ten risk factors causing death: hypertension, high cholesterol, and high blood glucose.
- Low fruit and vegetable consumption accounts for 2.9 per cent of deaths in low- and middle-income countries.
- Average food energy intake has shifted enormously in the past decades. While in the mid-1960s, 43 per cent of the world's population lived in countries with average intake of more than 2,200 kcal/day, by 2000 this proportion had more than doubled to reach 90%.

## To improve diets and save lives, we must act now:

- Promote consumption of fruit and vegetables.  
<http://ifava.org/toolkit/>
- Support trade and agricultural policies that make fruit and vegetables accessible and affordable.
- Promote food preparation methods that minimize the use of fat (baking, grilling, broiling, boiling, steaming, frying with little oil) and salt.
- Promote breastfeeding and good weaning practice.
- Promote institutional changes towards healthier oil/fat (moving from saturated and trans-fats to unsaturated oil/fats) and reduction of salt content.
- Support campaigns and policy changes that limit marketing of foods high in saturated and trans-fats, salt and sugar and sugary beverages, particularly to children:
  - European Network on Reducing Marketing to Children.  
<http://www.helsedirektoratet.no/marketing>
  - <http://www.retireronald.org/>
- Promote healthy diets in schools, workplaces and communities.
- Find out about risk factors in your own country.  
<https://apps.who.int/infobase/Index.aspx>  
[http://gamapserver.who.int/gho/interactive\\_charts/ncd/mortality/cvd/atlas.html](http://gamapserver.who.int/gho/interactive_charts/ncd/mortality/cvd/atlas.html)



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## What is an unhealthy diet?

Diets high in sugars, saturated and trans-fats, low fibre foods and high-sugar drinks contribute to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and other health problems. High intake of fast food and processed foods increases these health risks. According to the World Health Organization, an optimal diet includes: a balance between energy intake from food and energy expenditure from physical activity; energy from fats less than 30% of total intake, shifting fat consumption away from saturated fats; eliminating trans-fats; limiting intake of sugar and salt and increasing consumption of fruits, legumes, whole grains and nuts.

## What is causing the shift towards unhealthy diets?

Healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables are often unavailable or unaffordable among poor communities in both developed and developing countries. Increasing urbanisation causes people to move away from producing and cooking their own food and turn to prepared foods that are often high in sugar, salt and fat. Marketing influences food choices, and unhealthy foods are the most heavily marketed, especially among children.

## Who is most affected?

Globally, poor communities are often the ones hurt most by unhealthy diets. In many countries, fat and sugar have become the cheapest and easiest way to get calories, more accessible than fruit and vegetables and often even cheaper than traditional staples like grains, beans or lentils. Low- and middle-income countries form the largest growing markets and therefore are fertile ground for aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods like soft drinks and fast foods.

## What can be done?

Policies regulating food prices, production, processing and distribution can make healthy foods cheaper and more accessible. Legislation and other policies that restrict marketing can reduce the promotion of unhealthy foods, especially to children. Health professionals can emphasize the importance of healthy diet and they can advocate for policies and practices that promote healthy diet. School health programmes and community campaigns can educate children, parents, teachers and community leaders about the impact of diet on health and show how these groups can change the conditions that promote unhealthy choices.

For detailed references visit  
<http://www.worldheart.org/children>

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