

Obesity on Rise as Quarter of European Teens Eat Sweets Daily



A World Health Organisation (WHO) report paints a 'bleak picture' of young people eating and drinking too much sugar and spending too much time sitting down.

A quarter of adolescents in England and Wales eat sweets or chocolates every day and 14% have a cola or other sugary drink daily, according to the authors of a report that shows obesity rising among teenagers across Europe.

Even more adolescents in Scotland have a sweet tooth, with a third eating some sort of confectionery and 23% having a soft drink every day. And across Europe, adolescents spend 60% of their time sitting down.

The findings are part of a big new report on adolescent obesity in Europe, compiled by researchers at the University of St Andrews for the World Health Organisation. Gauden Galea, director of the WHO's division of non-communicable diseases which includes obesity, described the findings as "a bleak picture". Too many young people are in a harmful cycle, he wrote in a foreword to the report. "Most young people will not outgrow obesity: about four in every five adolescents who become obese will continue to have weight problems as adults."

Across Europe, the issues are the same. Young people are eating and drinking too much sugar and too little in the way of fruit and vegetables. They spend too much of their lives sitting down – most often at a computer screen.

Across Europe, 4% of adolescents were obese, says the report –

although data for nine countries including those in the UK was not included because it was not complete. Nearly one in five adolescents (19%) was either overweight or obese. The highest levels were found mainly in southern Europe.

In 2014, only about a third (38%) of adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 years from 40 countries and regions in Europe reported consuming fruit daily, while 3% claimed to never eat fruit. Boys ate significantly less fruit than girls, and as adolescents got older, their consumption dropped. Those living in wealthier families in all countries ate more fruit. A third (36%) of adolescents reported consuming vegetables daily, but 5% claimed never to eat vegetables.

Across Europe, 19% on average had a daily soft drink – the UK figures were higher – and a quarter (26%) ate sweets every day.

Physical activity levels were low and get lower as adolescents get older. “Young people spend approximately 60% of their waking time sitting, which makes sedentary behaviour the most common behaviour (besides sleep) in children and adolescents,” says the report.

“Despite sustained efforts to tackle childhood obesity, one in three adolescents is still estimated to be overweight or obese in Europe, with the highest rates found in southern European and Mediterranean countries. What is of particular concern is that the epidemic is on the rise in eastern European countries, where historically rates have been lower,” said Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO regional director for Europe. She called for ambitious action by governments.

“High rates of overweight and obesity among many countries in Europe are an important public health concern,” said Dr Joanna Inchley from St Andrews, the coordinator of the study, called health behaviour in school-age children (HBSC). “Obese young people not only have a higher risk of developing chronic

health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, but also face psychological issues such as low self-esteem, depression and social isolation.

“The proportion of young people who achieving the recommended level of daily physical activity remains stubbornly low in most European countries, suggesting that habitual forms of physical activity such as walking, cycling and active play have largely disappeared from adolescent’s lives.”

The Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of more than 40 organisations, said: “Obesity, especially in young people, is a major cause for concern across Europe just as it is in the UK.

“The next government needs to prioritise tackling childhood obesity with measures like the soft drinks industry levy, Public Health England’s sugar reduction programme and tighter regulations on junk food marketing to children, to give our young people a better chance of a healthier life.”

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