

# Load-shedding leaves SA battling the bulge as well as the dark

**SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER**

South Africans are feeling the weight of load-shedding in more ways than one.

Health experts warned this week that a change in eating habits, from home-cooked meals to takeaways, when the lights are out could worsen SA's obesity crisis.

Nathalie Mat, registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Association for Dietetics in SA, said: "It's unpleasant cooking in a dark kitchen, even if you can change your dinner plans to make an emergency dinner.

"Many of my clients who can afford to are buying takeaway foods, whether they are leaving the house to buy takeaways or ordering in."

"In the grand scheme of things, I don't view the occasional takeaway meal as an issue, but when it happens more than once a week or it changes the food preference of the family, these foods can displace more nourishing, home-cooked options.

"We know from research that restaurants tend to use more sugar, salt and fat than we do in our home cooking. Adding these ingredients to our regular consumption can change our taste preferences.

"This can make us want more sugar, salt and fat, which in excess are not ideal for our blood pressure, waist circumferences or health.

Hayley Cimring, the Heart and Stroke Foundation's nutrition science expert, and dietitian Kinza Hussain said eating more fast-food during periods of load-shedding can affect waistlines.

"Most fast-foods have high amounts of fats and added sugars. Because fats are energy-dense our bodies only require them sparingly.

"This means exceeding the recommended amounts will cause them to be stored in our bodies. Further to this, added sugars constitute empty calories. Once consumed, if not used by the body, the sugar gets converted into fats and [are] also stored in the body. In addition, load-shedding can result in the inability to be physically active, which can also influence weight gain," they said.

Cimring and Hussain said increased fast food consumption can increase the risk of cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases — heart diseases

and stroke — by causing obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

"A high salt intake is linked to high blood pressure. The recommended daily salt intake is not more than 5g [1 teaspoon] from all sources. All fast foods exceed this limit.

"Fast foods are high in the bad saturated fats which increase cholesterol levels in the body."

According to the foundation, 68% of women and 31% of men in SA are overweight or obese.

It said 13.5% of children aged 6-14 years are overweight or obese and have an increased risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease earlier in life.

"The foundation conducts regular health risk assessments in communities, which include taking weight, height and waist circumference measurements. The numbers we see are reflective of the change in eating habits and current obesity statistics."

Lori Lake of the Healthy Living Association (HEALA) said the majority of South Africans spend more than 50% of their income on food and families are struggling to make ends meet.

"HEALA calls for greater regulation of the food environment to empower consumers and protect the population from exposure to unhealthy foods."

Tiger Brands Foundation (TBF) operations manager Karl Muller said load-shedding also directly contributes to a huge rise in food waste.

Muller said SA households are less likely "to risk buying expensive food items, such as meat, in case it gets spoiled during prolonged episodes of load-shedding. Due to this and meal preparation often being disrupted, some households are turning to ready-made meals.

"There is increasing evidence that load-shedding is affecting South Africans' food choices, which is not good news for our health as a nation. People are likely to turn to fast-food when fresh food has either been spoiled or cannot be cooked due to power outages."

According to an Allied Market Research report, the SA fast food market size was valued at R45.5bn in 2018 and is expected to reach R82.6bn by 2026, with a compound annual growth rate of 7.9% from 2019 to 2026.

— TimesLIVE