



SOUTH AFRICA JOINS THE GLOBAL CALL: “8 BILLION REASONS TO ACT ON OBESITY”

On World Obesity Day (4 March 2026), South Africa stands alongside the global community in advancing the urgent call to action under the theme, “8 Billion Reasons to Act on Obesity.” With the world’s population now exceeding eight billion, the 2026 theme underscores a fundamental principle: every individual, in every country, has the right to environments, systems, and healthcare services that support healthy living and protect against preventable disease. This aligns with the South African theme of Changing Systems, Healthier Lives.

"It's time we turn our attention to the systems that are failing our children and contributing to increasing rates of obesity. The food systems are failing to provide young children with affordable, nutritious and diverse foods to prevent stunting and wasting in early childhood. On the other hand, the food systems are flooding shops, markets, and schools with energy dense, nutrient-poor, unhealthy, ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages." Says Gilbert Tshitadzi, UNICEF Nutrition Manager.

Obesity is one of the most significant public health challenges facing South Africa, contributing significantly to the rising burden of non-communicable diseases and increasing pressure on the health system and the economy. The National Department of Health is strengthening a comprehensive, evidence-based response that prioritises prevention across the life course, strengthens early detection and management, and aligns actions across sectors to address the underlying drivers of obesity.

Pierrette Nhlapo, Acting Senior Manager of PAN South Africa, mentions: “Critically, obesity is not simply a lifestyle issue, but it is a complex chronic disease that requires long-term, evidence-based and systemic solutions. PAN South Africa, therefore, welcomes the release of South Africa’s first national Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Obesity in Adults, which represents a timely and necessary step forward in supporting healthcare professionals to deliver structured, patient-centred care that improves long-term health outcomes.”

The South African Context

South Africa continues to face one of the highest rates of overweight and obesity on the African continent. Current data indicate that nearly 50% of South African adults

are overweight or living with obesity, with 68% of women and 31% of men affected. Childhood overweight and obesity rates remain among the highest in Africa.

Obesity-related conditions, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, contribute significantly to the country's non-communicable disease burden. Obesity is estimated to cost South Africa over R33 billion per year in direct healthcare expenditure alone.

At the same time, approximately 27–29% of children under five are affected by stunting, reflecting chronic undernutrition. “This coexistence of overweight, obesity, undernutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies represents the triple burden of malnutrition, often occurring within the same communities and households,” says Maria van der Merwe, President of the Association for Dietetics in South Africa.

A Systems-Based Public Health Challenge

Obesity is widely recognised as a complex, chronic disease influenced by multiple interacting systems, including food environments, socioeconomic conditions, urban design, marketing practices, and healthcare access. Framing obesity solely as an issue of personal choice fails to acknowledge these structural determinants.

“An increasingly obesogenic environment, with limited access to safe walking areas, training and sport facilities for children and adolescents, coupled with the high availability of energy-dense and nutrient-poor food choices, contributes significantly to rising obesity rates,” notes nutrition professionals.

For many South Africans, healthy food remains unaffordable or inaccessible, while ultra-processed, energy-dense foods are widely available. In numerous communities, safe spaces for physical activity are limited, and healthcare services remain overburdened, with insufficient structured support for obesity prevention and long-term management.

The 2026 theme underscores that all eight billion people are affected by the systems that shape health, and that sustainable progress requires comprehensive, multisectoral, and policy-driven solutions. Ms N. Sediti, Director of the National School Nutrition Programme, says: “The South African school food environment is diverse, ranging from the implementation of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which provides breakfast and lunch to children in order to combat food insecurity, to vendors and tuck shops selling mostly unhealthy food items at schools.”

She adds, “The unhealthy food items sold at school tuck shops, by vendors alongside schools, as well as unhealthy lunchboxes provided to children, are challenges that contribute to obesity. Nutrition education is not prioritised in schools and requires intervention through stricter labelling regulations and improved oversight of food items sold to children.”

Liesel Engelbrecht, nutrition lead for the Hold my Hand Accelerator, incubated at the DG Murray Trust, says “To truly close the food gap, we need policy action that makes nutritious foods more affordable and accessible, protects children from harmful marketing, strengthen food provision and nutrition standards in schools and ECD centers, and integrates maternal nutrition into social protection and health services.”

Call to Action

On World Obesity Day 2026, the National Department of Health calls upon all sectors of society to intensify coordinated efforts to prevent and manage obesity across the life course. This includes strengthening and implementing evidence-based policies that improve food environments, promote responsible marketing practices, enhancing early screening and intervention services, and fostering environments that enable healthier choices.

Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, adds: “We believe that improving obesity prevention and management in South Africa requires practical action and strong collaboration between government, healthcare professionals, communities, non-government organisations, and industry. By building on the work already underway and strengthening collaboration across all sectors, we can make healthy choices easier and reduce the impact of obesity on families and communities across South Africa.”

Addressing obesity is not only a public health priority but also an economic imperative. A healthier population reduces long-term healthcare expenditure, improves productivity, and contributes to sustainable national development.

Dr. Edzani Mphahuli, Executive Director at Grow Great Campaign, says, “We must protect the first 1,000 days. Pregnant women must be able to afford and eat healthy food during this critical period of development. Breastfeeding must be protected and supported. Ultra-processed baby food marketing must be tightly regulated, and healthy food must be made affordable. Community health workers and community programmes like Grow Great Flourish must be fully supported to help families feed children well from the very beginning.”

Nutrition Society of South Africa chairperson, Dr Marieke Theron shares: “I believe that we need to incorporate policies to subsidise healthy food prices in some way so that people can afford to buy items such as fruits, vegetables, quality proteins and high fibre cereals. There should be ways for people to access healthy foods by implementing food stamps or something similar, that would ensure that those who cannot afford healthy foods can still access those foods.”

Shenaaz El-Halabi, World Health Organization Representative in South Africa, calls for coordinated, multi-sectoral action across three parallel areas. She emphasizes: “Strengthening prevention by creating healthier environments that make the

healthier choice the easier choice is critical. We need to protect children from unhealthy food marketing and promoting safe community physical activity initiatives.”

She further highlights the need to reinforce the primary health care response by integrating routine obesity screening and counselling, equipping nurses and community health workers with practical management tools. Lastly, she underscores “Industry engagement through product reformulation to reduce sugar, salt and unhealthy fats is of prominence. Focus on transparent labelling to support informed consumer choice and restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children.”

“8 Billion Reasons to Act on Obesity” serves as a reminder that every South African deserves equitable access to the conditions necessary for good health. Through coordinated partnerships between government, civil society, healthcare professionals, and communities, South Africa can advance toward a healthier future for all.

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