

Childhood obesity prevention strategies

The five-year plan sets out four main lines of action to help countries reduce rates of child obesity:

- **Breastfeeding promotion:** The plan urges countries to promote breastfeeding in their primary health-care services, through the certification of "Baby-Friendly Hospitals," and through stronger enforcement of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes. Research suggests that longer breastfeeding can reduce rates of obesity and overweight by about 10%. Breastfeeding also helps mothers lose weight after pregnancy.
- **Better food and more physical activity in schools:** Schools should prevent access to high-calorie, low-nutrient processed food products and sugar-sweetened beverages, providing students with healthier foods and water instead. Schools should also set aside at least 30 minutes for physical activity during the school day.
- **Junk food taxes and restrictions on marketing:** Increased taxes can help reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and unhealthy food products by raising their prices. The plan also urges restrictions on advertising of unhealthy foods to children and regulations that mandate easy-to-read, front-of-package nutrition labels.
- **Increased access to recreational spaces and nutritious foods:** The plan calls for initiatives such as "Sunday bikeways" (*ciclovías recreativas* in Spanish), which open up city streets on weekends for biking and recreation, and urges programs to support small and medium-sized farms to help increase the availability of fresh foods.

"What's important is to take action," says Dr. Enrique Jacoby, PAHO advisor on healthy eating and healthy living. "We know what is overwhelmingly driving the obesity epidemic—it's the shift away from real foods and meals prepared in traditional ways to consumption of low-nutrient processed and ready-to-eat products. Many of our countries have been translating that knowledge into action, and now others are showing their commitment to do this as well."

In approving the plan of action, the ministers of health urged PAHO to support countries' efforts to implement the plan by providing:

- evidence to inform the development of new policies and regulations

- guidelines for preschool and school meal programs
- guidelines for foods and beverages sold in schools
- support for measuring changes in rates of overweight and obesity in countries.

The PAHO Directing Council meets yearly—except for every fifth year, when the Pan American Sanitary Conference meets instead—to set the organization's policies and priorities. Delegates include health authorities from PAHO's 35 Member States and representatives of its four Associate Members, three Participating States, and two Observer States. In addition to setting mandates for PAHO's technical cooperation programs, the meeting also provides a forum for technical experts and government representatives to exchange information and debate regional health priorities.

PAHO, established in 1902, is the world's oldest international public health organization. It works with all the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of their peoples and serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO). For more information visit: www.paho.org.

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