

Obesity in Saudi Arabia

Editorial

Over the last few decades, the world has been on an inexorable trend of rising belt sizes and decreased physical activity. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia exemplifies this trend; it has one of the fastest-growing obesity rates in the world, according to a report published this year.¹ The report also claims that 70-75% of Saudi adults are overweight, and around a third are obese.

Obesity causes lifestyle diseases, such as hypertension, coronary vascular diseases, and diabetes, and so it is unsurprising that the prevalence of these health issues is soaring in Saudi Arabia. Diabetes rates continue to climb,² due to high-fat diets and decreased exercise, as well as the country's hypertension rates.³ The burden of coronary heart disease is also on the rise.⁴

Saudi men are roughly the same size as their American counterparts: in both countries, 7 out of 10 men are overweight, including a third who are obese. Saudi women, however, compare unfavourably to Americans. Three quarters of Saudi women are overweight, and 44% are obese, compared to 62% of American women who are overweight, and a third who are obese.¹ The difference is mainly for cultural reasons. In Saudi Arabia, not only do women do little physical activity, but they are also actively discouraged from exercising, due to conservative Islam traditions. Women's gyms are banned by the culture but start to grow up gradually and when women do exercise publicly, they are often stopped one of the major reason is the hot weather all the year. Women cannot even ride bicycles in public without full Islamic dress and the accompaniment of a male relative. And only in 2012 did Saudi women compete in the Olympic Games for the time but they had to wear hijab. Furthermore, traditionally a woman's place is at home, thus limiting her chances for physical activity further. Saudi men do not mind; in fact they like their wives to be overweight. Indeed, in the past, obesity is seen as a desirable sign of success and beauty, inverting the common Western belief that skinnier is more attractive. However, now a days the women and men they start to realized the side effect of obesity and start to think about the anti obesity procedures.

Obesity also affects the country's children: a quarter of Saudi boys are overweight, as well as over a third of girls. Only last year were Saudi girls allowed to practise sport at school for the first time. However, this only applied to private schools; girls in public schools are still prohibited from participating in sport.

Why is Saudi Arabia overweight? The answer is inextricably linked to the country's remarkable economic success in the last fifty years. Oil has made the country rich, thanks to the country's vast oil reserves and the rise in the global oil price. Indeed the vast majority of the country's total exports is oil, and the country is the world's main oil producer and exporter. The money has meant that Saudi Arabia has taken on all the benefits and burdens of a developed country, including obesity. After all weight excess is often linked to a country's prosperity.⁵ Many Saudis can now afford to high level of education, and have jobs that require little physical activity. Indeed, the job market has long shifted from manufacturing and farming to

Volume 1 Issue 1 - 2014

Naif AlEnazi

Department of surgery, Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz hospital, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Naif AlEnazi, Consultant Bariatric, Laparoscopic and Robotic surgery, Department of surgery, Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz hospital, P.O. Box 861 | Zip 11492, Riyadh-Saudi Arabia, Email Surgeon_n@hotmail.com

Received: October 16, 2014 | **Published:** October 21, 2014

sedentary jobs in offices. Unsurprisingly, obesity is more common in urban areas than rural areas⁶ partly due to the high availability of cars and public transport in cities.

Food has also always been intrinsic to Saudi life and culture. Meals are an important part of the day, and are a time when the whole family gets together. Meals were healthy in the past, but due to westernization, the Saudis have adopted typical Western eating habits. Nowadays, typical Saudi meals are high in fat, meat, and calories, and low in vegetables and fruit (except for dates, which have always been popular).⁷ Saudis have more access to fast food and ready meals than ever before, with outlets such as KFC and McDonalds spreading across cities like Riyadh, Dammam and Jeddah. Many Saudis are not even aware that foods high in cholesterol, triglycerides, and salt are responsible for hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

Saudi Arabia is just one of several rich countries in the Middle East, such as Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Qatar, who are all on a trend for shocking levels of obesity. In Kuwait for example 59% of women are obese.¹ Their citizens are insufficiently educated about the adverse health effects of obesity. Instead, being overweight is a symbol of success, and ironically, good health. The Saudi healthcare thus needs to spread basic knowledge about nutrition through education and awareness campaigns, to encourage to improve their diets and to exercise more. Another solution may be a fast food tax, to artificially increase the price of unhealthy foods. The country also suffers from longstanding harmful expectations of women in society, and there is need for a deep and widespread cultural shift to allow women the right to exercise freely.

Globalization and economic prosperity has been a double-edged sword for Saudi Arabia, and the country now has to fight obesity along with the rest of the world. Something has to be done to slow this "age of obesity" in Saudi Arabia.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Ng M, Fleming T, Robinson M, et al. Global, regional, and national prevalence of overweight and obesity in children and adults during 1980–2013: A systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2013. *The Lancet*. 2014;384(9945):766–781.
2. Al-Nozha MM, Al-Maatouq MA, Al-Mazrou YY, et al. Diabetes mellitus in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Med J*. 2004;25(11):1603–1610.
3. Bcheraoui CE, Memish ZA, Tuffaha M, et al. Hypertension and Its Associated Risk Factors in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2013: A National Survey. *Int J Hypertens*. 2014;2014(2014):564679.
4. Al-Nozha MM, Arafah MR, Al-Mazrou YY, et al. Coronary artery disease in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Med J*. 2004;25(9):1165–1171.
5. Anand SS. Obesity: the emerging cost of economic prosperity. *CMAJ*. 2006;175(9):1081.
6. Al-Nuaim A, Bamgboye EA, al-Rubeaan KA, et al. Overweight and Obesity in Saudi Arabian Adult Population, Role of Sociodemographic Variables. *J Community Health*. 1997;22(3):211–223.
7. Al-Rethaiaa AS, Fahmy A–EA, Al-Shwaiyat NM. Obesity and eating habits among college students in Saudi Arabia: a cross sectional study. *Nutr J*. 2010;9:39.