

Press release

1 June 2017

For immediate release

Low and middle-income ASEAN policymakers have a “blind spot” when it comes to obesity

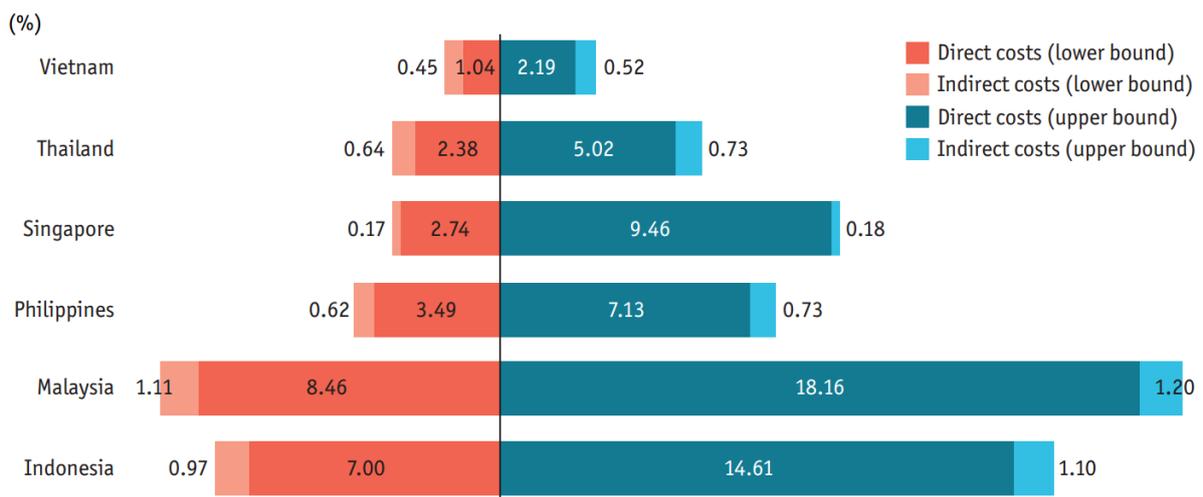
- *Obesity prevalence rates have more than tripled in low and middle-income countries through 1980-2013*
- *ASEAN countries facing the highest costs of obesity in 2016 are: Indonesia (US\$2-4bn) and Malaysia (US\$1-2bn)*
- *Obese workers in ASEAN are less productive than their healthy counterparts. They effectively contribute to the economy for between four and nine years less than the working-age population average*
- *Individually, interventions that target either food intake or exercise show the greatest promise in the fight against obesity. The effectiveness of interventions that target both is even higher*

Thursday 1 June 2017, Singapore:

Historically, the prevalence of obese and overweight people has been low in ASEAN. However, obesity prevalence rates have more than tripled in low and middle-income countries through 1980-2013. The implications of this trend are severe – obesity is linked to many non-communicable diseases and is reducing life expectancy, which has serious consequences for household income, economic growth and productivity in ASEAN.

A new report released today (June 1st) by The Economist Intelligence Unit titled [“Tackling obesity in ASEAN”](#), analysed obesity in ASEAN through consumer and healthcare practitioner surveys, an intervention effectiveness analysis, and an economic impact assessment. The report finds that *total costs of obesity* represented as a percentage of national healthcare spending in the ASEAN-6 are highest in Malaysia (10–19%) and Indonesia (8–16%). They are lowest in Vietnam (1–3%) and Thailand (3–6%).

Figure 1: Total costs of obesity as a percentage of healthcare spending



Workers with obesity-related conditions (including type 2 diabetes, cancer, and stroke) in our ASEAN country sample are less productive than their healthy counterparts. They effectively contribute to the economy for between four and nine (productive) years less than the working-age population average.

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s intervention effectiveness analysis evaluated various interventions targeted at individuals or the entire population sample, broadly categorised into: physiological, psychological, food-based or activity-based interventions. Interventions targeted at food and exercise show greatest promise in the fight against obesity.

Amongst food-based interventions, low glycaemic index diets were found to be the most effective, based on the strength of the evidence base. Low-calorie, low-fat and low-carbohydrate diets have also shown promise as reliable, targeted interventions to combat obesity. However, food-based interventions cannot be directly legislated or regulated. Reducing portion sizes, taxing specific food types and implementing “choice environment” measures can be effective instruments.

Based on the high magnitude of population impact, activity-based interventions showed great promise and are well suited to fight childhood obesity. Obesity in childhood is hard to reverse and can lead to chronic illness. Physical education should therefore become a more central part of school curricula in ASEAN, backed by investment that ensures educational establishments have the necessary facilities.

Figure 2: Interventions showing greatest promise

Category	Subcategory	Example interventions/focus of interventions	Promise of intervention	Direction of evidence base	Quality of body of evidence	Magnitude of population impact	Stakeholder driving change			
							Healthcare	Education	Food	Policy
Physiology	Individual	Anti-obesity drugs	★★	↗	Strong	Medium	●			●
Activity	Individual	Physical activity	★★★	↗	Moderate to strong	High	●	●		●
Food	Individual	Calorie-controlled diet	★★	↑	Moderate	Medium	●	●	●	
		Low-fat diet	★★	↑	Moderate	Medium	●			
		Low-carbohydrate diet	★★	↑	Moderate	Medium	●			
		Low-glycaemic index diet	★★★	↑	Moderate to strong	Medium	●			
	Population	School and workplace policies	★★	↗	Moderate	High	●	●	●	●
		Controlling portion size in processed and prepackaged foods	★★	↗	Moderate	High			●	●
		Taxation	★★	↗	Moderate	High				●

Although developing countries in ASEAN have other challenges to overcome, the long-term economic cost of obesity and its connection to several non-communicable diseases suggest that acting early would be prudent.

Download the full report at: www.eiu.com/obesity-in-asean

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