

# Cracking down on obesity in South Africa

Obesity is one of the major public-health concerns facing South Africa, with an economic impact estimated at R701bn each year.

 By [Katja Hamilton](#) 19 Apr 2023



Source: [Pexels](#)

Of the research done on our country's population, 31% of those affected by obesity are male, 68% female and 13.5% are children aged five years and up. The numbers representing children far exceed the global average of 6.1%.

These alarming figures were just some of the red flags raised on the general health of South Africans at the three-day Nutrition Congress which kickstarted on 18 April at The Lord Charles Hotel in Somerset West.

Co-hosted by the Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA) and the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA), it shares the latest findings and recommendations across all fields of nutrition ranging from public-health nutrition challenges specialities such as therapeutic nutrition.

A highlight of the event on the first day was Rebone Ntsie's good news.

## Government backs obesity prevention

As directorate of nutrition at the National Department of Health, Ntsie confirmed funding for the national 2023-2028 Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Obesity has been given the green light.

The new strategy's point of differentiation is that it looks at the mandate of healthcare systems in SA and addresses who in government is specifically tasked with providing accountability in different categories, Ntsie said.

As a start it proposes that people have access to healthy food which is connected to a healthcare system that supports the prevention and management of obesity. The idea is to reduce the prevalence of obesity by addressing diets that contribute to the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases. NCDs kill an estimated 15 million people per year in SA.

To this end, the new strategy will extend its Health Promotion Levy to foods that are high in unhealthy fats, sugar and salt, and establish a nutrient profiling model that will set the baseline for what is considered "healthy" or "unhealthy" amounts of sugars, unhealthy fats and salt in manufactured food.

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The new strategy also looks to make healthy food accessible and affordable at schools and workplaces, aims to introduce free exercise facilities at these touchpoints and will introduce more dietitians to the primary healthcare system.

Furthermore, the new strategy will prioritise the training and education of more healthcare and community workers, and will conduct research and gather more data on obesity in the country, Ntsie said.

Lastly, big food advertising, targeting children, will be addressed so that children are not manipulated into choosing unhealthy fast food at school, particularly in cases where children are given pocket money to buy food at tuckshops.

## A long walk to actionable results

The national 2023-2028 Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Obesity is an update of the 2015-2020 strategy. To go ahead for the funding was a long time coming given the first multisectoral workshop to gather feedback on the review process of the revised strategy was held in November 2021,

The progress was met with delight by participants, particularly as the strategy has a monitoring, evaluation and research system in place, which will include mid- and end-term evaluations of the strategy's implementation and impact.

This goal is especially noteworthy, given the absence of monitoring, evaluation and follow-up for the 2015-2020 strategy.

It is estimated that the strategy's [six main goals](#) that include education and communication, and policy and legislation, will be achievable within five years.

## ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Construction Editor at Bizcommunity.  
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