

Combating Obesity: A Vision For Viksit Bharat

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Received: 21 Jan 2026 Accepted & Reviewed: 25 Jan 2026, Published: 31 Jan 2026

Abstract

Obesity is being viewed as a challenge in fulfilling the dream of a developed India, as a healthy population is crucial for national productivity, economic growth, and preserving the cultural and social heritage of any nation. Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, considering the health of Indians as a patriotic duty, has launched the Fit India Movement and is making concerted efforts through various ministries- MoHFW, Ministry of Ayush, Ministry of Women and Child Development, FSSAI etc. to address this potential national challenge. This research paper has been prepared during this Amrit Kaal (Golden Era) of India, focusing on raising awareness among all Indians about their health responsibilities and the government's policy-based initiatives.

Key Words: Healthy Population, National Challenge, National Productivity, Economic Growth, Patriotic Duty, Fit India Movement, FSSAI, Policy based initiatives.

Introduction

The concept of a developed India is a government initiative to make India a developed nation by the year 2047, and it is also the resolve of every Indian. It encompasses all aspects of economic, social, and environmental development. A developed India is a dream that every Indian cherishes. It envisions a prosperous nation where people have access to quality education, better healthcare facilities, and a safe environment. To fulfill this resolve or dream, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, has been motivating Indians through various programs and platforms, such as the 79th Independence Day celebrations and 'Mann Ki Baat', to emphasize the importance of fitness and combat obesity, because talking about a developed nation without healthy citizens would be meaningless. Let us now discuss India's obesity statistics in the current context –

- According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 (2019-21), overall, 24% of Indian women and 23% of Indian men are overweight or obese.
- According to NFHS-5 (2019-2021), in the 15-49 age groups, 6.4% of women and 4.0% of men are obese.
- At the all-India level, the percentage of overweight children (weight-for-height) fewer than 5 years of age has also increased from 2.1 percent in NFHS-4 (2015-16) to 3.4 percent in NFHS-5 (2019-21).

This research paper will discuss various aspects related to the fitness and obesity of Indians, which is one of the many aspects of India's journey from a developing to a developed nation.

Major factors contributing to the rise in obesity in India –

Let's explore different causes of obesity in India and examine the social, environmental, and lifestyle factors that contribute to this widespread health problem.

1. Changing Dietary Patterns

India has witnessed significant shifts in its dietary patterns. The traditional diet, once rich in grains, fruits, and vegetables, has gradually been replaced by foods high in sugar, fat, and calories. This shift is driven by factors such as urbanization, rising disposable incomes, and the influence of Western-style diets. The consumption of fast food, packaged snacks, soft drinks, and ultra-processed foods is increasing, leading to higher calorie intake and weight gain.

2. Sedentary Lifestyle

Due to urbanization, technological advancements, and modern desk-based work lifestyles, physical activity has decreased among Indians. Bad habits such as prolonged sitting, excessive screen time, and reliance on transportation have become common. The lack of regular exercise and training not only reduces energy levels but also increases the risk of obesity and health problems.

3. Limited Access to Physical Activity Facilities

Despite growing awareness about the importance of sports, many Indians face difficulties in participating in physical activities. Lack of access to parks, playgrounds, gyms, and open spaces, especially in urban areas, limits opportunities for exercise. Additionally, safety concerns, mismanagement, and overcrowding in public spaces deter people, particularly women and children, from engaging in outdoor activities.

4. Cultural Attitudes towards Physical Activity

Cultural practices and attitudes towards physical activity vary across different regions and communities in India. While some groups value health and exercise, others may consider physical activity unnecessary or even harmful to health. For women in particular, the stigma associated with exercise can prevent them from participating in sports or physical activities. Furthermore, in Indian society, obtaining a good education and a job often takes precedence over physical health.

5. High Stress Levels

Modern life in India often results in excessive stress stemming from various sources, such as workload, financial worries, and responsibilities. Chronic stress symptoms trigger physiological responses that lead to weight gain and increased obesity. Stress-related behaviors such as overeating, intense cravings, and binge eating can cause an imbalance in calorie intake and expenditure, contributing to obesity.

6. Food Insecurity and Poverty

Despite economic growth, a significant portion of India's population still faces food insecurity and poverty. Financial constraints lead to a lack of access to or availability of nutritious foods, causing individuals and families to rely on cheaper, high-calorie foods that lack essential nutrients. This phenomenon, known as the double burden of malnutrition, is prevalent in many low-income households, characterized by a combination of obesity, nutrient deficiencies, and excessive calorie intake.

7. Unhealthy School Food Environment

Schools play a crucial role in shaping children's eating habits and behaviors. However, the availability of numerous unhealthy food options in school cafeterias, vending machines, and canteens makes promoting nutrition and healthy beverages challenging. Processed snacks, soft drinks, and fast food available in schools encourage unhealthy eating habits among students and contribute to childhood obesity.

8. Aggressive Marketing of Junk Food

Food companies' marketing strategies are crucial in shaping consumer behavior and food choices. Advertisements promoting junk food and drinks are ubiquitous across India, particularly targeting children and teenagers. Celebrities, social media influencers, and public figures are often used to endorse desserts, soft drinks, and fast food, associating them with concepts of happiness, fun, and fame.

9. Lack of Nutrition Education

Despite increasing health awareness, many Indians lack adequate knowledge about healthy and nutritious eating. Nutrition education programs in schools and communities are often limited and insufficient in scope. As a result, people may struggle to understand proper nutrition, portion control, and the effects of excessive consumption of processed foods and drinks. This lack of knowledge about food contributes to malnutrition and obesity.

10. Urbanization and the Built Environment

Rapid industrialization in India has led to significant changes in the built environment, impacting lifestyles and health. Urban areas are characterized by high population density, limited green spaces, and inadequate physical infrastructure. Walk ability, easy access to parks, and public transportation options in the surrounding urban environment influence activity levels and obesity rates. Furthermore, urbanization and traffic congestion contribute to increased sedentary lifestyles and air pollution, which are also linked to obesity.

11. Genetic Predisposition

Genetic factors play a significant role in determining an individual's risk of obesity. While genetics alone do not cause obesity, they interact with environmental and behavioral factors in weight management. Certain genetic variations affect metabolism, satiety cues, and fat storage, making some individuals more prone to obesity than others. Race and a family history of obesity-related conditions, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, also increase the risk of obesity.

12. Social Determinants of Health

In India, obesity is influenced by social determinants of health such as education, employment, and access to healthcare. Individuals with lower levels of education and income may have less access to healthy food, healthcare, and recreational opportunities. Economic inequality creates disparities in obesity prevalence; marginalized communities face greater challenges in adopting healthy lifestyles. Social norms, peer relationships, and weight stigma influence behaviors, activities, and body image.

13. Urban Food Environment

The proliferation of fast-food restaurants, convenience stores, and street vendors has transformed the food environment in India. Easy access to high-calorie, unhealthy foods can contribute to overconsumption and weight gain among urban dwellers. Fast food, snacks, desserts, and processed foods are often cheaper and more convenient than fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthier options. The prevalence of unhealthy food hinders efforts to improve health and prevent obesity.

14. Limited Healthcare Resources

Despite the increasing prevalence of obesity and related diseases, medical resources for prevention and management remain limited in India. Primary care often prioritizes more acute conditions over chronic diseases like obesity, resulting in inadequate support for individuals seeking lifestyle modifications and weight

management. Furthermore, the stigma associated with obesity can exacerbate the problem by deterring individuals from seeking medical help or accessing support services.

15. Cultural Norms and Food Practices

Religious culture, traditions, customs, and ideologies dominate Indian society. In some cultures, a larger body is associated with prosperity, fertility, and health, making obesity more common. Festivals, weddings, and ceremonies often revolve around food, where entertainment and hospitality are emphasized. Cooking methods, recipes, and preferences may prioritize taste and palatability over nutritional quality, leading to overeating and weight gain.

Futuristic problems of Obesity

According to the NIDDK (National Institute of Diabetics and Digestive and Kidney Diseases) report, being overweight and obese can increase your risk of several health problems, especially if you have excess fat around your waist. Some of these include:

1- Type 2 Diabetes

Globally, more than 800 million adults suffer from diabetes. Type 2 diabetes occurs when your blood sugar levels become too high. Approximately 9 out of 10 people with type 2 diabetes are overweight or obese.

2- High Blood Pressure

Being overweight or obese can also increase your risk of high blood pressure. High blood pressure, also called hypertension, is a serious health condition that increases the risk of death.

3- Heart Disease

Being overweight or obese increases the risk of developing conditions that can lead to heart disease, such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, and high blood glucose. Losing weight can help you reduce these risk factors for heart disease.

4- Stroke

Excess body fat also increases the risk of stroke. A stroke, also called a brain attack, is a medical emergency that occurs when blood flow to a part of the brain is interrupted. High blood pressure is a major cause of stroke, and obesity increases the risk of high blood pressure. Losing weight can help you avoid this.

5- Fatty Liver Disease

Fatty liver disease has become a common problem today. It involves the accumulation of excess fat in your liver, which can lead to liver damage, cirrhosis, or even liver failure. Fatty liver disease often affects people who are overweight or obese.

6- Cancers

Being overweight and obese can also increase the risk of developing certain types of cancer. Men who are overweight or obese are at higher risk of colon, rectal, and prostate cancer. While in overweight or obese women, breast, uterine, and gallbladder cancers are more common. Losing weight can protect you from these cancers.

7- Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is a common problem that occurs while sleeping. It involves a blockage of the upper airway, causing you to breathe irregularly or stop breathing completely for short periods. Obesity can be a cause of sleep apnea in adults. However, losing weight can help reduce or eliminate sleep apnea.

8- Metabolic Syndrome

Metabolic syndrome is a group of conditions that increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. According to experts, metabolic syndrome is strongly linked to overweight, obesity, and lack of physical activity.

9- Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is also a common problem in obese people. It causes pain, swelling, stiffness, and reduced mobility in your joints. In fact, being overweight or obese can increase the risk of developing osteoarthritis by putting extra pressure on your joints and cartilage.

10- Pregnancy-Related Problems

Being overweight and obese increases the risk of developing health problems during pregnancy that can affect the health of both the mother and the unborn child.

Pathways to Prevent Obesity

Prevention from Obesity can be divided into two categories:

1. Individual efforts
2. Government efforts

These are described below:

Individual efforts

Preventing obesity involves a combination of **healthy eating habits**, **regular physical activity**, adequate **sleep**, and **stress management**. These lifestyle changes should be sustainable over the long term and ideally adopted by the entire family.

1- Dietary Recommendations

- **Focus on whole foods:** Emphasize a diet rich in fruits, vegetables (at least five portions a day), legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains (like brown rice, oats, whole-wheat bread).
- **Choose lean protein sources:** Include lean meats, poultry, seafood, beans, and lentils in your meals.
- **Limit unhealthy fats and sugars:** Reduce consumption of foods and drinks high in saturated fats, Trans fats, added sugars, and sodium. This includes limiting fast food, processed snacks, and sugary drinks like soda and fruit juices.
- **Control portion sizes:** Be mindful of portion sizes to avoid overeating. Using smaller plates can help.
- **Drink plenty of water:** Opt for water, tea, or coffee without added sugar instead of high-calorie beverages.
- **Eat regular meals:** Avoid skipping meals, especially breakfast, as this can lead to overeating later in the day.
- **Eat mindfully:** Pay attention to hunger cues and avoid eating in front of the TV or other screens, which can lead to mindless eating.

2- Physical Activity

- **Get regular exercise:** Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking, cycling, or swimming) or 75-150 minutes of vigorous activity per week. Children should get at least 60 minutes of activity a day.
- **Reduce sedentary time:** Limit screen time and break up long periods of sitting by standing or stretching frequently.
- **Incorporate movement into daily life:** Take the stairs instead of the elevator, park further away, walk or cycle to nearby destinations, and make household chores more active.
- **Add strength training:** Include muscle-strengthening activities at least twice a week.

3- Lifestyle and Behavioral Changes

- **Ensure adequate sleep:** Aim for 6 to 8 hours of quality sleep per night for adults (more for children) to help regulate appetite hormones.
- **Manage stress:** Use relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises to cope with stress, which can trigger unhealthy eating habits.
- **Seek support:** Involve family and friends in your healthy lifestyle goals or join a support group.
- **Monitor progress:** Keep a food and activity log to stay accountable and track your habits.
- **Consult a healthcare provider:** Regularly monitor your Body Mass Index (BMI) and consult with a doctor or dietitian for personalized advice and to rule out any underlying medical conditions or medications that may contribute to weight gain.

Government of India's Strategic Framework for Obesity Prevention

Recognizing obesity as a **critical public health concern**, the Government of India has launched **comprehensive, multi-pronged initiatives to prevent, manage, and reduce obesity** at all levels. The interventions are strategically designed by **multiple ministries** to promote a **holistic approach** that integrates **health, nutrition, physical activity, food safety, and lifestyle modifications**. These efforts can be categorized under the following **key intervention areas**:

1. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) – Strengthening public health Responses

In India, **non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** cause **63% of all deaths**, according to **WHO's 2018 - NCD India** profile. The leading causes are cardiovascular diseases (27%), followed by chronic respiratory diseases (11%), cancers (9%), diabetes (3%), and other conditions, including obesity (13%).

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases are largely driven by modifiable lifestyle factors, including tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and alcohol consumption. Air pollution further increases the risk. These factors contribute to **obesity, high blood pressure, elevated blood sugar, and raised cholesterol levels**, all of which significantly increase the likelihood of developing NCDs. Since many of these risk factors are preventable, **addressing obesity and unhealthy habits** can play a crucial role in **reducing the burden of NCDs**.

The Department of Health and Family Welfare under the **National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) (NP-NCD)** through the **National Health Mission (NHM)**, aims to promote health through behavior change by **engaging communities, civil society, media, and development partners**. It focuses on **screening, early diagnosis, management, referral, and follow-up at all healthcare levels** to ensure continuous care. The program also strengthens the capacity of healthcare providers

for **prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, awareness (IEC/BCC), monitoring, and research.** Additionally, it enhances supply chain management for essential drugs, equipment, and logistics while ensuring effective supervision, evaluation, and nationwide implementation through a uniform ICT system.

2. Ministry of AYUSH: Promoting Traditional & Holistic Wellness Practices

The Ministry of Ayush has implemented several initiatives to address obesity and promote effective weight management through Ayurveda:

1. **Specialized Ayurvedic Care** : The **All India Institute of Ayurveda (AIIA)** in New Delhi offers specialized treatments for obesity and related lifestyle disorders. These treatments combine **Panchakarma therapies**, Ayurvedic medications, personalized dietary guidelines, and yoga therapy. To date, approximately 45,000 patients with diabetes and metabolic disorders have benefited from these services.

2. **Research and Evidence Generation**: The **Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS)** conducts research to validate the safety and efficacy of Ayurvedic interventions for lifestyle disorders, including obesity. Studies have demonstrated that practices such as **Dincharya (daily regimen)**, **Ritucharya (seasonal regimen)**, **Ahara (dietary guidelines)**, and Yoga are effective in maintaining overall health and preventing conditions like obesity.

3. **Ayurswasthya Yojana**: This **Central Sector Scheme**, operational since **FY 2021-22**, includes the '**Ayush and Public Health**' component aimed at promoting AYUSH interventions in community healthcare. The scheme supports projects focused on managing lifestyle disorders and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), with 11 projects currently addressing issues such as **obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and osteoporosis.**

4. **Collaborative Research Efforts**: The Ministry has partnered with the **Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)** to enhance scientific research in Ayurveda. This collaboration focuses on developing and implementing research programs that integrate traditional Ayurvedic knowledge with modern science, particularly in managing lifestyle disorders like obesity.

Through these comprehensive measures, the Ministry of Ayush is actively contributing to the prevention and management of obesity, promoting a holistic approach to health and well-being.

3. Ministry of Women and Child Development: Poshan Abhiyan- Preventing childhood Obesity

POSHAN Abhiyan, launched on **8th March 2018**, is the Government of India's flagship initiative for holistic nourishment. It aims to improve nutritional outcomes for **children, adolescent girls, pregnant women, and lactating mothers** by fostering a convergent ecosystem that enhances nutrition content, delivery, and awareness to combat malnutrition and promote overall wellness.

4. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports: Fostering a Culture of Physical Fitness

4.1 Fit India Movement: A Mass Fitness Revolution

Launched by PM Narendra Modi in 2019, the Fit India Movement promotes active lifestyles and encourages individuals to incorporate fitness into daily routines.

4.2 Khelo India Programme: Building an Active Generation

The Khelo India – National Programme for Development of Sports was launched in 2016-17 to promote sports participation at all levels, from schools to elite competitions, by fostering a culture of athletic excellence across the country. It focuses on providing top-notch training and world-class infrastructure to young athletes, ensuring they receive the necessary resources to excel in their respective sports. The scheme ensures equal sports opportunities across rural and urban India.

5. Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI): Regulating Food for public health

5.1. Eat Right India Movement (FSSAI): Reforming Food choices for a Healthier Future

The *Eat Right India* movement, initiated by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), encompasses several key initiatives aimed at ensuring safe, healthy, and sustainable food for all.

5.2 Nationwide Awareness Campaign- Aaj Se Thoda Kam

To encourage healthier eating habits, FSSAI launched the '**Aaj Se Thoda Kam**' campaign, urging consumers to gradually **reduce their intake of fat, sugar, and salt**.

5.3 Regulating High Fat, Salt, and Sugar (HFSS) Foods
FSSAI, in collaboration with the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), has recommended mandatory labeling of High Fat, Salt, and Sugar (HFSS) foods. This initiative aims to:

- a. Ensure clear front-of-pack labeling on ready-to-eat foods.
- b. Help consumers make informed choices and moderate their intake of unhealthy foods.

5.4 Multi-Platform Public Awareness Initiatives - The Government, with FSSAI's leadership, has been actively spreading awareness through:

- a. Print, electronic, and social media campaigns educating the public on healthier food choices.
- b. Integration with the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases, and Stroke (NPCDCS), which supports state-level awareness activities on obesity prevention and healthy living.

5.5 RUCO Initiative

FSSAI's **RUCO (Repurpose Used Cooking Oil)** initiative ensures that used cooking oil is not re-entered into the food chain but is safely repurposed. When oil is repeatedly used for frying, harmful **Total Polar Compounds (TPC)** form, increasing the risk of diseases like hypertension, atherosclerosis, and liver disorders. To protect public health, FSSAI has set a **25% TPC limit** beyond which oil must not be used. Under the **EEE Strategy (Education, Enforcement, Ecosystem)**, used cooking oil is collected by aggregators from food businesses and redirected for biodiesel or soap production, promoting health, energy security, and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion:- Obesity is emerging as a serious public health challenge in India, and the Government of India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, is addressing this potential national challenge by integrating health, nutrition, fitness, and various regulatory measures through initiatives such as the Fit India Movement, NP-NCD, Poshan Abhiyan, Eat Right India, and Khelo India. As India moves towards Amrit Kaal (the golden era), the vision of a healthy and fit India is also transforming into reality. It is the responsibility of all Indians to contribute to this endeavor by adopting healthy lifestyles, actively participating in physical activities, and improving their dietary habits.

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