SPIKE IN OBESITY PUTTING MORE UGANDANS AT RISK OF CANCER

By Agnes Kyotalengerire and John Masaba

The increase in obesity in Uganda is pre-disposing more citizens to cancer, further complicating the country's fight against the ailment amid limited resources, health experts have warned.

Dr Deogratius Ssenkumba, an expert at Aga Khan University Hospital in Kampala, said Ugandan hospitals are receiving more cases of obese people suffering from prostate, breast, colon and stomach cancer than their lean counterparts.

"We are seeing more individuals who are obese battling hormone-related cancers," he said.

Obesity is an excessive accumulation of body fat, where one's body mass index exceeds 30. According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey of 2022, obesity in Uganda stands at 13% and is likely to worsen if nothing is done.

Speaking to *New Vision* during a media engagement on cancer awareness and education at Aga Khan University Hospital Specialty Centre in Kampala on Wednesday, Ssenkumba advised people, especially women, to check their weight.

Explaining the link between obesity and cancer, Dr James Kafeero, a medical officer at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), said it arises when excess fat in the body is broken down, consequently contributing to the formation of oestrogen, which is a driver for hormone-related cancers, such as breast, ovarian and prostate cancers.

"If you are obese, then you have a lot of fat deposits that the body breaks down to produce additional drivers of cancer," he said, adding that UCI registers many cases of obese women battling hormone-related cancers.

Various studies conducted both locally and internationally show a big link between obesity and cancer.

According to research conducted by the American Institute for Cancer Research in 2018, there is strong evidence that being overweight or obese throughout adulthood increases the risk of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx and oesophagus, stomach, pancrease, liver, gallbladder, ovary, endometrium, prostate, kidney and colorectum.

"The evidence further shows that in general, the more weight one gathers as an adult, the higher the risk of post-menopausal cancer," the research findings read.

Dr Annet Nakirulu, a paediatric haematologist-oncologist at Mulago Hospital, stressed that cancer management must move beyond treating physical symptoms and, instead address the emotional, psychological and social realities facing patients and families who often spend months or years navigating treatment, uncertainty, financial hardship and fears surrounding survival and death.

"We are seeing that management has to be holistic. It cannot only focus on physical treatment," Nakirulu said, adding that health workers must learn to recognise signs of emotional distress early enough to provide timely mental health support to patients and caregivers.

HOW TO AVOID OBESITY

- Eat fewer carbohydrates and more fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid consumption of fatty foods and sugary drinks.
- Burn the extra calories by engaging in at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise every week
- Get at least seven to eight hours of quality sleep to regulate appetite hormones and manage daily stress



Oncology nurse Kuluthum Ndagire explaining how the CT scan machine works during a media engagement on cancer awareness and education at Aga Khan Hospital in Kampala on Wednesday

CHILDREN NOT SPARED

Ssenkumba said the obesity-cancer linkage is not limited to adults as children are also victims. He said many children are suffering from cancer because of diet and lack of exercise.

Ssenkumba attributed the spike in cases to parents who feed children on processed foods, adding that the issue is made worse by the increase in screen time and failure to exercise across homes.

Dr Grace Ocheng Lonyo, the principal nutritionist at the Ministry of Health, agreed with Ssenkumba, warning that the rising consumption of foods with high levels of sugar, salt and chemical additives is fuelling non-communicable diseases among minors.

"Many children suffer from cancer, diabetes and hypertension," she said.

Lonyo warned parents to watch out for the cause factors. She said obesity can be caused by genetical factors, medication, failure to exercise and bad diets.

"Obesity can predispose individuals to diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and even certain cancers. There are mechanisms in the body that can be triggered and obesity is one of the drivers. Some people are born with a genetic predisposition, meaning their family history can influence their likelihood of becoming obese," she explained.

Speaking during the closure of a cancer diagnosis training on May 8, Nakirulu explained that children receiving cancer treatment often endure repeated hospital admissions, painful medical procedures and uncertainty about survival, leaving many emotionally exhausted and fearful about the future, especially adolescents who sometimes associate cancer diagnosis with prolonged suffering, hopelessness and eventual death.

"Chemotherapy itself several side effects," she noting that emotional suff frequently affects treat adherence and overall being among children families navigating the diff cancer journey.

Nakirulu said the nu of diagnosed childh cancer cases has contin to rise over recent ye due to increased awaren improved diagnostic capac growing expertise amo health workers and bet access to medicines an specialised oncology serv within Uganda's referral h facilities.

"At the beginning, we had about 300 children in our oncology unit, but now we are seeing beyond 400 diagnosed cases annually. The burden is increasing," she said, warning that the growing patient numbers require more holistic approaches to cancer treatment and support services.

GOVT PLANS NEW POLICY

Lonyo said as part of efforts to reduce diet-related obesity, the health ministry is developing front-of-pack nutrition labelling guidelines that food processors will have to implement in order to help consumers, especially parents, to make informed dietary choices.

"We want warning labels on processed foods so that consumers clearly see if a product is high in sugar or salt. If you are trying to protect your heart or manage sugar intake, you can make an informed decision," she said.

Lonyo added that the dietary guidelines and broader healthy eating initiatives will target all age groups – from children to the elderly.



Dr Deogratius Ssenkumba

CANCER BURDEN

Data from Uganda Cancer Institute reveals that every year, the country records about 46,000 new cases of cancer and among these, about 25,000 (78%) succumb to the disease.

Besides, access to cancer services is extremely low, meaning that many die unreported.

At the moment, access to services stands at 22%, which means that for every 100 people who get cancer, only 22 receive care, which is very low. This is an increase from 4% that was recorded about 15 years ago. To improve access, the Government has established cancer treatment centres in Mbarara, Arua, Gulu, Mbale and Jinja.

BETWEEN THE LINES

The rising consumption of foods with high levels of sugar, salt and chemical additives is fuelling non-communicable diseases among minors.

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