

# Combating Obesity Among University Students

## Background

Obesity has become one of the highest threats to public health, including university students. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>(1)</sup>, since 1975, the global obesity rate has nearly tripled. In Malaysia context, it has the highest obesity rate in East and Southeast Asia. Obesity is associated with a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome and type II diabetes. Moreover, obesity may increase the risk of infection, hospitalization, clinically severe disease, mechanical ventilation, ICU admission, and mortality due to COVID-19, according to current evidence<sup>(2)</sup>.

Focusing on university students, the collegiate period is a critical time for altering physical activity, psychological status, and dietary patterns that lead to overweight and obesity in college students and that might affect health, academic performance and productivity of the students<sup>(3)</sup>. Obesity is also considered to be the most significant preventable cause of death.

The above discussion shows the need to act comprehensively to stop the threat of obesity and its health and social consequences for college students. Therefore, this policy brief aims to raise awareness of investment in, and action for a set of cost-effective interventions that can assist the Ministry of Higher Education, universities' leaders, and policymakers in preventing the ongoing rises in obesity among college students.

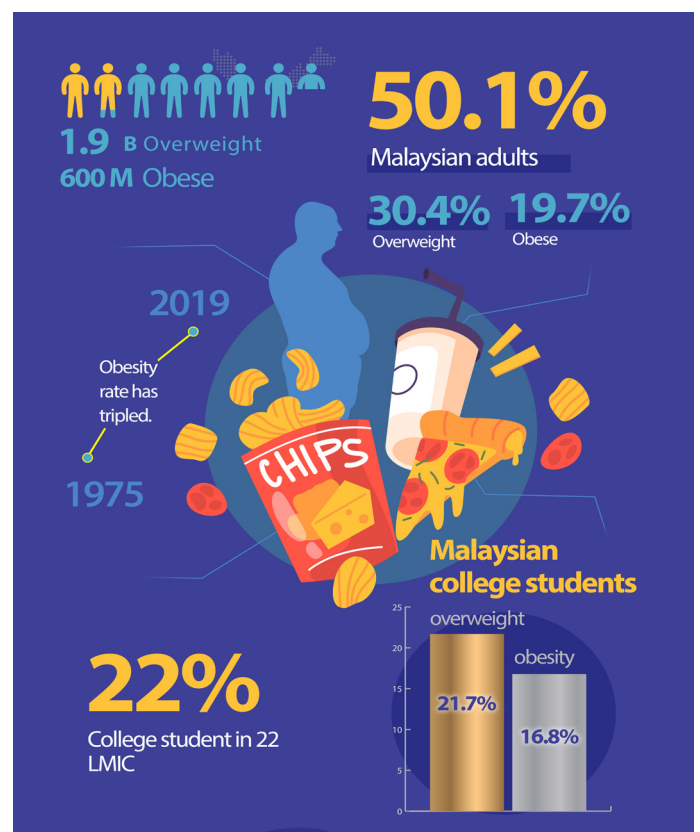
## Current situation

Malaysia's rapid development in recent decades has altered lifestyles, which may contribute to an increase in overweight and obesity. According to the 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey, 50.1% of Malaysian adults are overweight with a total percentage of (30.4%) or obese with a total percentage of (19.7%). In universities

students context, the prevalence of overweight and obesity among college students in 22 low and middle-income countries found that 22% were overweight or obese (24.7% are men and 19.3% are women). This shows that obesity among university students is a common issue in many countries, including Malaysia. According to<sup>(3)</sup>, the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Malaysian university students was 21.7% and 16.8%, respectively.

The psychological pressure of study and its requirements, making the students put more time and effort into fulfilling these requirements. Psychological stress is reported to be one of the determinants that influence weight gain through multiple pathways, including biological responses to such stress that leads to an increase in cortisol<sup>[4]</sup>. Also, stress has an impact on behaviour which leads to an increase in food consumption (emotional eating disorder) and a sedentary lifestyle.

There is evidence that unhealthy food intake



(fast food and soft drinks), social media use and stress exhibit the highest weightage contributing to overweight and obesity issues for Malaysian university students <sup>(5)</sup>. Malaysian National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPANM) III, 2016–2025, includes specific sections for higher education institutes, but the gap is in implementing and enforcing the recommended intervention

measures. Additionally, this strategy ignores some essential and critical risk factors that may lead to overweight and obesity, such as academic stress and how to handle it in universities. Therefore, we need to pay more attention to college students and design programs to address the risk factors associated with obesity among them.

## Recommendations

Advocate upstream and downstream levels of intervention to reduce obesity and mitigate its health, academic, social consequence effects among college students.

The Ministry of Higher Education and universities' leaders are recommended to

### Healthy food environment

put a clear policy to ban vending machines in universities setting to limit access to soda and power drinks, establish health standards and menu labelling for the meals served in university cafeterias, ensure the provision of healthy and affordable food choices, and monitor the implementation of those standards.

### Infrastructure for active transportation

Invest in and improve active transportation infrastructure within universities to encourage walking and cycling among college students.

### Health education programs

Design and carry out health education programs to increase university students' awareness of the negative consequences of obesity and the benefits of adopting a healthy lifestyle. Such programs must emphasize increasing self-efficacy among students regarding dieting and physical activity.

**perceived threat (the sum of severity and susceptibility), cues to action, and the perceived self-efficacy concerning dieting and physical activity has a significant association with the behavioural intention of losing weight among college students <sup>(6)</sup>.**

### Coping skills

Adopt the Coping skills programs such as CTI intervention principle and (Mindfulness training) to assist students who are stressed in reducing their stress levels. CTI helps to provide active processes through which the participants can generate questions, express their thoughts and relevant information, and discuss solutions regarding their stress, resulted from their illogical beliefs instead of the passive reception of information from other sources <sup>(7)</sup>.

### Motivation approach

Adopt a motivation program to motivate college students to engage in healthier habits, such as increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and maintaining physical activity levels through online lessons, like WebHealth Project it is effective for undergraduates and fresh students. In addition, decision-makers can establish a **club** for college members to share their weight-control knowledge and experiences and mutually inspire other students.

**Marathons** and competitive sports leagues are conducted periodically.

### Collaborations

Collaborate with the Ministry of Health and non-governmental organizations involved in the fight against obesity in order to implement the World Health Organization's and the national strategies in a way that is consistent with the determinants and risk factors that affect college students, such as response to stressful events.



# Reference

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