

# Obesity preparedness in Asia and the Pacific

by Ian Anderson

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*Photo Credit: jannoon028/Freepik*

The latest [World Obesity Atlas 2023](#) – yes, there is such a thing – has three important findings for countries globally, including those in the Asia-Pacific region. First, the prevalence of obesity is rising rapidly, especially in middle income countries and among the young. Second, obesity has very significant – but often avoidable – financial and economic impacts, as well as health impacts. Third, few low and middle income countries are adequately prepared to respond: for example, Papua New Guinea is ranked 182 out of 183 countries in the world in terms of “global preparedness”.

The Atlas reports significant increases in the prevalence of obesity at the global level. It notes, for example, that “every country is affected by obesity” (body mass index or BMI of  $\geq 30$  kg per metre of height squared) and that no country has reported “a decline in obesity prevalence across their entire population, and none are on track to meet the World Health Organization’s (WHO) target of ‘no increase on 2010 levels by 2025’”.

The report goes on to say that 51%, or more than 4 billion people, will be living with either overweight (BMI  $\geq 25$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>) or obesity by 2035 if current trends prevail; 1 in 4 people (nearly 2 billion) will have obesity. Figure 1 shows the projected increase in numbers, and increased proportion, of the population globally being overweight or obese between 2020 and 2035.

## **Figure 1: Global overweight and obesity, 2020-35**

## Numbers of people (aged over 5 years) and percentage of the population with overweight or obesity\*

	2020	2025	2030	2035
Number with overweight or obesity (BMI $\geq 25$ kg/m <sup>2</sup> ) (millions)	2,603	3,041	3,507	4,005
Number with obesity (BMI $\geq 30$ kg/m <sup>2</sup> ) (millions)	988	1,249	1,556	1,914
Proportion of the population with overweight or obesity (BMI $\geq 25$ kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	38%	42%	46%	51%
Proportion of the population with obesity (BMI $\geq 30$ kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	14%	17%	20%	24%

\* For children and adolescents, overweight and obesity are defined using the WHO classification of +1SD and +2SD above median growth reference.

Source: *World Obesity Atlas 2023*, p. 11

The Atlas emphasises that the largest proportion of obesity globally already occurs in middle income countries. It estimates that, globally, just on 60% of men and women with obesity lived in middle income countries in 2020, with this share projected to rise to 70% by 2035. The share living in high income countries falls accordingly.

The Atlas also includes projections for the rise in obesity for different geographical regions. For example, it estimates the total number of adults living with obesity will more than double between 2020 and 2035 in both the WHO Western Pacific region – which includes China but also the Pacific Island countries – as well as the WHO South-East Asia region. Importantly, the prevalence of obesity (that is, the proportion of the population at a given point in time) is expected to double, on average, for key cohorts over that period as well (Figure 2). For example, the Atlas estimates the prevalence of obesity in men to increase from 8% of the adult population to 19% in the Western Pacific region, and for women to increase from 8% to 16% in the South-East Asia region, between 2020 and 2035.

## Figure 2: Projected prevalence of obesity in adults in WHO’s Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions (proportion of population in millions)

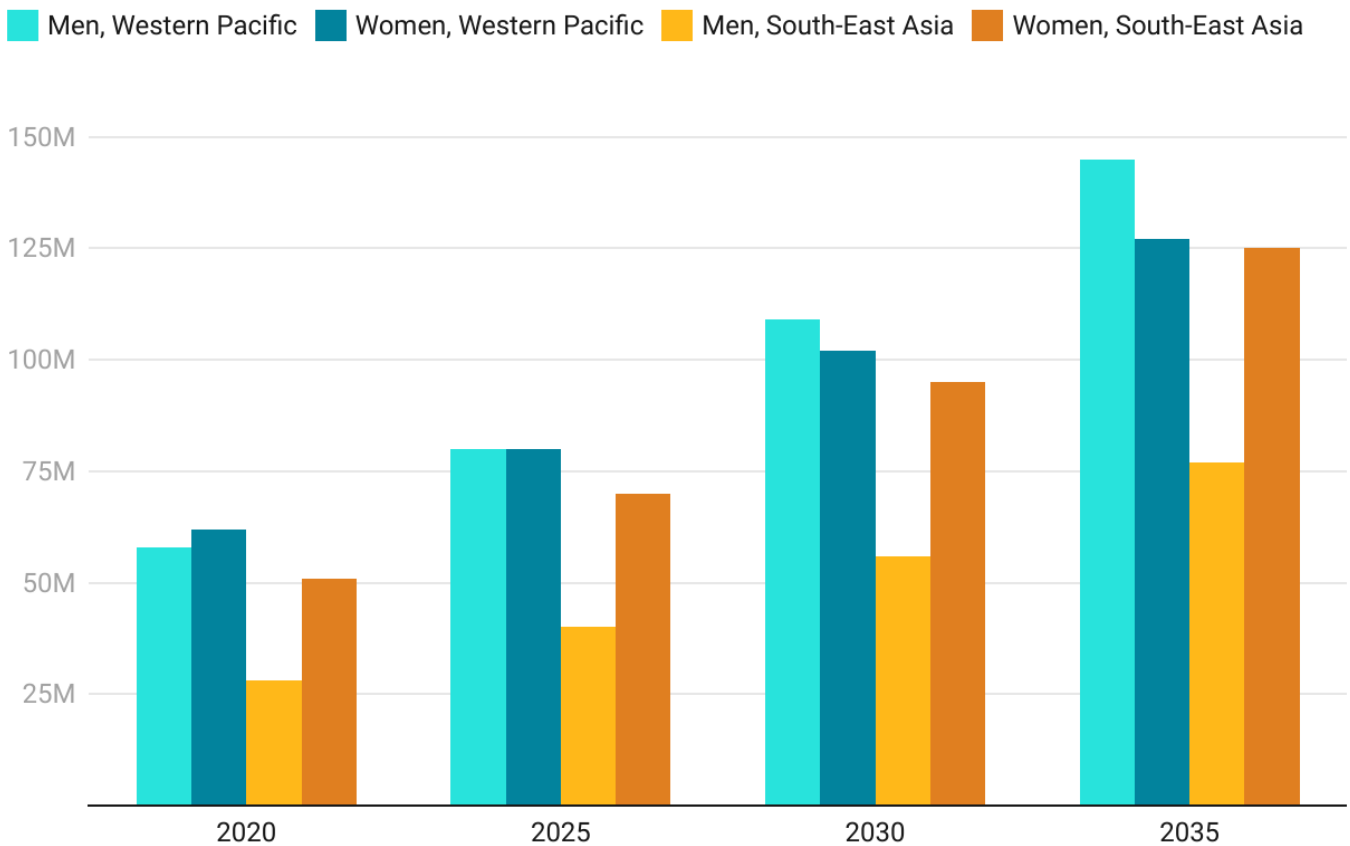


Chart: Ian Anderson • Source: World Obesity Atlas 2023 “Country scorecards” • Created with Datawrapper

One of the most interesting and useful, but potentially disturbing, parts of the Atlas is the assessment of individual countries’ “readiness to cope with the predicted rising levels of obesity, especially in its more severe forms, and the consequential NCDs [noncommunicable diseases] that arise”. In essence, the report draws on four sources of information to generate a “preparedness ranking” for 183 individual countries for which data is available.

The first source of data is the extent of effective universal health coverage in a country, using the 23 indicators that are tracked as part of the Sustainable Development Goals as at 2019 (latest year available). The second source of data is the WHO listing of premature deaths due to NCDs as a proportion of all NCD deaths, given the high degree of correlation between obesity and NCDs. The third source of data is the extent to which a country provides any of 13 NCD-related indicators in the public health system, for example, general availability of diabetes testing and/or total cholesterol measurement at the primary health care level, and general availability of statins in the public health sector. The fourth source involves data on 12 “NCD-related policy-related indicators for the prevention of NCDs at a

national level”, including policies to reduce physical inactivity, salt consumption, unhealthy diets, and marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

Figure 3 summarises the preparedness rankings for countries in Asia and the Pacific. Switzerland (not shown) is ranked first out of 183 countries. Within the Asia-Pacific region the Republic of Korea is assessed as being the most prepared, ranked 17 out of 183 countries globally. Four countries in the region are in the top 34 countries of the world rated as “good” (dark green rows). The Atlas uses a traffic light classification with countries rated as “fairly good” (light green), through “average” (yellow), to “poor” (light red) and “very poor” (bright red). Eight countries in Asia and the Pacific are rated as “very poor”. Definitions of the terms used are [on page 229 of the report](#).

**Figure 3: Global preparedness rankings for Asia-Pacific countries out of 183 countries globally**

	Rank
Republic of Korea	17
New Zealand	19
Japan	20
Australia	24
Sri Lanka	40
United States of America	41
Timor-Leste	44
China	47
Malaysia	55
Thailand	86
India	99
Bangladesh	108
Vietnam	108
Tonga	109
Samoa	110
Bhutan	113
Philippines	119
Korea Democratic Republic	122
Indonesia	131
Fiji	134
Cambodia	135
Nepal	139
Myanmar	141
Federated States of Micronesia	144
Solomon Islands	152
Laos	156
Kiribati	168
Pakistan	172
Vanuatu	173
Papua New Guinea	182

Table: Ian Anderson • Source: World Obesity Atlas 2023 "Country scorecards" • Created with Datawrapper

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There are some worrying scenarios for countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Of concern is that PNG is rated 182 out of 183 countries, that is, the second least-prepared country in the world after Niger, which is ranked last at 183. This is worrying because the Atlas estimates that the annual increase in adult and child obesity in PNG over the period 2020-2035 will be, respectively, 2.8% and 5.2% per annum. That, in turn, implies adults with obesity will be 38% of the population of PNG by 2035. The Atlas also has projections that by 2035 around two-thirds or more of the adult population will have obesity in a number of countries in the region including the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Samoa and Tonga.

On a more positive note, the Atlas rates Timor-Leste's and Sri Lanka's global preparedness as "fairly good" (ranked 44/183 and 40/183) with adult obesity prevalence of 12% and 14% by 2035 respectively. As lower middle income countries, Timor-Leste and Sri Lanka may therefore have program and policy lessons for other countries in the region. Identifying those specific lessons would be a useful subject for next year's edition of the World Obesity Atlas.

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