

Smoking, drink, obesity may shorten European lives: WHO (Update)

September 23 2015

"Alarming" rates of smoking, alcohol consumption and obesity in Europe could mean the next generation live shorter lives, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned on Wednesday.

While Europeans are living longer than ever before, increases in life expectancy and declines in premature mortality may "flatten off" if the three big lifestyle risk factors are not dealt with, a senior WHO director said.

In a report on the region's health, the WHO said there remain "unacceptably high" differences in life expectancy between countries, with an 11-year gap between the highest and lowest.

The first study of its kind for three years, the report covers 39 countries including European Union member states as well as former Soviet republics.

Levels of premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)—including cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases—are decreasing "quickly", the report said.

But levels of alcohol consumption, tobacco use and obesity remain "alarmingly high" and this "could mean that this progress is not maintained," it warned.

"Europeans live long lives and healthy lives. We are the longest living

region in the world," said Claudia Stein, a senior WHO director for Europe.

But "the differences in health status between European countries are... inexplicably wide."

"If rates of smoking and alcohol consumption and obesity do not decline we may risk the gains in life expectancy we have seen—which may mean that the next generation may lead shorter lives than that we do."

World's biggest drinkers

Although rates of smoking and alcohol consumption are declining in many parts of the continent, Europeans still smoke and drink more than people anywhere else in the world, according to the WHO.

It estimates that on average 11 litres of pure alcohol are drunk per person each year, while 30 percent of the population uses tobacco.

Meanwhile obesity is increasing, with 59 percent of Europe's population either overweight or obese, ranking only slightly behind the Americas which have the highest rates in the world.

The European Health Report 2015 looked at progress made towards the WHO's "Health 2020" targets.

Average life expectancy for men and women ranges from 71 in Belarus, Moldova and Russia to 82 for countries like France, Italy and Spain according to figures from 2011.

The gap represents a fall of three years since 2009 and Europe is "on track" to exceed targets to reduce premature mortality from NCDs by at least 1.5 percent a year by 2020, the report said.

But Stein said that there could be a "flattening off of the curve" affecting the next generation's life expectancy, if lifestyle risk factors are not addressed.

"We think that the gains we see... the increases in life expectancy and the declines in premature mortality... may flatten off if these risk factors are not dealt with," said Stein.

"It would be tragic if the next generation did not at a minimum have a higher life expectancy than ours."

'War' on obesity

Some countries have seen a dramatic decline in smoking rates, notably Greece, Russia and Bulgaria, official figures show.

Meanwhile obesity has tripled in many European countries since the 1980s, with 23 percent of Europeans now obese, according to the report.

"Smoking rates are going down everywhere—we have very few exceptions—but obesity is increasing and one does not offset the other," Stein told AFP.

"What we do not want to see is that we are winning the war against alcohol and smoking but losing the war against obesity."

She said there were also "unacceptable" health inequalities to tackle.

Infant mortality has fallen to an all-time low but there remains a 10-fold difference between the highest and lowest countries, with 22 deaths per 1,000 births in Kyrgyzstan compared to two in Finland.

"The differences between countries in life expectancy and mortality are shrinking. But the differences are still there and some of them are extreme," Stein said.

This year's report also looked for the first time at the impact of "life satisfaction" on life expectancy.

Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland—the four countries reporting the most "life satisfaction" according to polling data collected by Gallup—also have some of Europe's highest life expectancy rates.

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Citation: Smoking, drink, obesity may shorten European lives: WHO (Update) (2015, September 23) retrieved 21 November 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-09-alcohol-obesity-tar-europe-bill.html>

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