

Childhood overweight in East Asia and Pacific has doubled, making the region home to one in four of the world's affected children — UNICEF

Broken food environments, shaped by junk food marketing and weak regulation, fuel the surge in childhood overweight.



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Childhood overweight and obesity in East Asia and the Pacific has more than doubled in the past two decades, with over 113 million children and adolescents now affected, according to a new UNICEF report.

This makes the region home to the largest number of children living with overweight in the world — one in every four overweight children globally.

The report, [Turning the Tide on Childhood Overweight in East Asia and the Pacific – Building Better Food Environments for Children](#), warns that childhood overweight is at worrying levels across the region, with more than 15 per cent of children and adolescents affected in 30 out of 33 countries. The report also highlights that undernutrition is falling, and obesity has surged to nearly twice the rate of underweight, a striking reversal that shows how malnutrition is taking new and dangerous forms.

“Every child has the right to nutritious food, yet across our region they are relentlessly targeted with unhealthy products that endanger their well-being,” said June Kunugi, UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and Pacific. “Overweight children face higher risks of diabetes and other health problems, as well as stigma that affects their mental well-being. Without action, many will carry these challenges into adulthood.”

Aggressive junk food marketing, misleading labelling, and the flood of unhealthy ultra-processed foods are fueling the crisis. In Viet Nam, sales of these unhealthy foods soared 257% between 2017 and 2021; and in Lao PDR, 136%. Nearly eight in ten adolescents in Southeast Asia eat ultra-processed snacks or meats, while two-thirds drink sugary beverages.

Children are targeted with advertisements

Children are targeted with ads across TV, schools, supermarkets, and online, often using cartoons and jingles to drive consumption. In Thailand, unhealthy food ads dominate peak child viewing hours.

Overweight and obesity not only undermine children's health and learning, but also place a heavy burden on families, health systems and economies. By 2030, the costs are projected to reach 2 per cent or more of GDP in most countries across East Asia and the Pacific, threatening the region's long-term development.

Across the region, bold action is taking shape. Thailand has finalized a draft law to curb unhealthy food marketing, including restrictions on the use of cartoon characters and other child-appealing techniques on packaging and advertising. Viet Nam has approved its first tax on sugary drinks, set to reach 10% by 2028. And in Malaysia, the Government has strengthened its sugar tax as part of a national 'war on sugar,' with UNICEF support helping ensure the policy aligns with global standards.

UNICEF calls for action on five fronts

UNICEF is urging a whole-of-society response to turn the tide on childhood overweight. The organization calls for action on five fronts:

- **Governments:** Ban unhealthy food ads aimed at children, introduce front-of-pack warning labels, tax sugary drinks, and make schools healthy food zones with safe water.
- **Food and beverage industry:** Reformulate products to cut sugar, salt and fat, and end predatory marketing to children.
- **Retailers:** Reshape stores by moving sugary drinks and snacks out of sight and giving fresh, nutritious foods more space and promotion.
- **Schools:** Provide healthy meals, integrate nutrition lessons, and ensure free safe drinking water for every child.
- **Communities and young people:** Speak up and demand healthier food environments, keeping leaders accountable for children's rights.

“Children’s right to grow up healthy depends on choices made today,” said Ms. Kunugi. “It will take governments, businesses, schools and communities joining forces to stop unhealthy diets from defining an entire generation.”

[Turning the Tide on Childhood Overweight in East Asia and the Pacific – Building Better Food Environments for Children](#) is produced by UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO). All data sources in the report include UNICEF/WHO/World Bank Joint Malnutrition Estimates (2025), NCD-RisC, and the World Obesity Federation.

The report also features several case studies from across East Asia and the Pacific, highlighting government action and innovative approaches. -**unicef.org, September 10, 2025**