

For Immediate Release



AUB-led multi-institutional research team finds that obesity among children is on the rise

Health Min. Ali Hassan Khalil promises to base health strategy on research findings

Beirut, Lebanon- 20/01/2012 - Obesity among children and adults has almost doubled over the past 15 years, something which could also increase the prevalence of chronic diseases in the next generations, warned researchers at the American University of Beirut.

During a special half-day seminar held at AUB on January 20, 2012, the latest results of a three-year collaborative study on undernutrition and obesity were disseminated.

The study was launched in 2009 under the Associated Research Unit (ARU) on Undernutrition and Obesity which was established by the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in 2009, in a collaboration between three academic institutions: the Nutrition and Food Sciences Department at AUB, the Nutrition Department of the Faculty of Pharmacy at Universite Saint Joseph, and the Human Nutrition and Dietetics Department at Universite Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (USEK).

About one in six children under 10 years old is now obese, according to the findings of the unit, which collected its data in 2009. In contrast, one in 10 children under 10 was obese in 1997. Meanwhile, one in four adults over 20 years old and one in eight adolescents in the 10-20 age group are obese. In 1997 only one in 18 adolescents was obese.

Obesity is a prime risk factor for chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disorders as well as other diseases.

In fact the ARU study found that 30 percent of obese children and 20 percent of obese adolescents show a predisposition for chronic diseases.

For this reason the ARU team has developed a food-based dietary guideline for adults and is planning to develop another one for children to prevent health problems later on in life.

"Research has shown that diet in the first two years of a child's life sets the stage for chronic diseases and other health problems later on in life," said Professor Nahla Hwalla, lead researcher and the dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at AUB.

Hwalla added that while the team did not find signs of undernutrition among Lebanese children, there were indications that the quality of food being consumed was not healthy.

The next step is to implement these findings in a school-based intervention program and to conduct studies that would pinpoint the geographical areas that are most affected by obesity or malnutrition.

During the opening ceremony of the seminar, CNRS secretary-general Mouin Hamze underscored the importance of using research to guide policy-making and noted that CNRS had established five research units, four of which are led by AUB.

AUB President Peter Dorman lauded the work conducted by the multi-institutional research team, highlighting the role academia can play in positively impacting its environment. "Universities are often described as ivory towers that tend to be disengaged from their environment, but we are determined to counter this impression," Dorman said, adding that AUB has been sharing its knowledge and research with governmental and non-governmental agencies to help develop better policies and enhance quality of life for everyone.

Health Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, under whose patronage the seminar was held, praised AUB for its leadership role in research and promised that the ministry will base its health strategy on this research.

"We need to work on public awareness about nutrition in order to prevent diseases, especially since food and eating is a huge part of our culture," said Khalil. "We have to develop a clear national strategy for nutrition that will set roles for the ministries of education, health and information."

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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