The Global Nutrition Transition from Undernutrition to Obesity – Can It Be Prevented?

JUAN RIVERA, M.S., PH.D.

Director, Center for Research in Nutrition and Health, National Institute of Public Health, México

ABSTRACT

México is undergoing a rapid nutrition transition. In almost two decades for which national nutrition data are available (1988-2006), wasting has been virtually eliminated, stunting was reduced to half, while anemia has declined more modestly. During the same period, excess BMI (overweight and obesity) increased in most age groups (doubled in adults, increased three times in adolescents, and also raised in children), rural and urban areas and all socioeconomic groups. Nutrition related chronic diseases (NRCD) such as T2D and CVD have also increased.

Among the factors that are likely responsible for the decline in wasting and stunting are a sustained poverty reduction, as measured by income, and consequently enhanced access to food by the poor; improvements in water, sanitation and public health programs; and implementation of a new generation of evidence-based nutrition programs that were well designed, had high coverage, were well targeted and evaluated.

The rise of excess BMI parallels increases in known risk factors for obesity: increased availability and intake of total fat, sugar-sweetened beverages, whole milk, and refined carbohydrates, and a decline in the intake of whole grains, beans, fruits and vegetables. Trends in other preventative factors, such as physical activity are unknown, but there is evidence of low levels of physical activity. “Obesogenic” environments have been documented in schools and other settings. The government is implementing a national multisectorial strategy for the prevention of obesity, with goals and actions that include regulation of food and beverages in schools and other actions that are promising.