

With obesity and diabetes epidemic, Mexico braces for coronavirus

by Reuters

Thursday, 26 March 2020 20:30 GMT

By Stefanie Eschenbacher and Adriana Barrera

MEXICO CITY, March 26(Reuters) - Four of the six people who have died from coronavirus in Mexico so far had diabetes, raising alarm bells that a country with one of the world's highest rates of the condition may be more vulnerable than its relatively young average age might suggest.

The World Health Organization has said people with diabetes and its related health complications are among those most vulnerable to severe cases of the highly contagious and sometimes deadly illness caused by the new coronavirus, along with the elderly.

Mexico has the fewest retirement-age citizens among nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). But it has the highest rate of obesity after the United States, and related illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes are widespread.

Mexico had 475 confirmed cases of COVID-19 - the illness caused by the virus - and six deaths by Thursday. Four of those who died had diabetes and two suffered from hypertension - both conditions that can exacerbate the illness. A seventh Mexican who died in Peru also had diabetes. While four of the victims were over age 60, the other two were 55 and 41.

"Coronavirus isn't that lethal, except for people who have underlying health conditions that complicate it," said Dr. Abelardo Avila, a researcher at the Salvador Zubiran National Institute for Medical Sciences and Nutrition. "Unfortunately, that's the case for many millions of Mexicans."

When details of the coronavirus deaths in Mexico became public, even health officials who had previously urged the population to remain calm began to acknowledge the scale of the problem the country is facing.

"Obese people, particularly morbidly obese ones, are the ones who are at biggest risk to suffer complications if they contract coronavirus," said Ricardo Cortes, a Mexican health official.

PROCESSED FOOD CONSUMPTION TAKES A TOLL

In Mexico, an initially much-applauded tax on sugary beverages has yet to show major results, efforts to introduce food labeling have stalled and magazines like Diabetes Hoy line newspaper stands.

Type 2 diabetes, by far the most common form of the disease, occurs when the body becomes resistant to insulin, or no longer produces enough. There is a direct correlation between the condition and obesity and poor diet, with more than 80% of diabetes cases are linked to obesity. And government data shows the chronic metabolic disease also often runs in families.

Over time, diabetes can damage the heart, blood vessels, eyes, kidneys and nerves. And rates have risen significantly in recent years.

In Mexico, 10.3% of the population aged 20 or older - 8.6 million people - suffer from diabetes, according to government data from 2018, up from 9.2% six years earlier.

After heart disease, diabetes is the most common cause of health-related death in Mexico.

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is even more prevalent, affecting 18.4% of the population aged 20 or older - 15.2 million people - up from 16.6% six years earlier.

Obesity reached epidemic proportions in Mexico after it joined a free trade agreement with the United States in the early 1990s and processed food became more easily available, several studies have shown.

Mexico is now the largest consumer of ultra-processed food in Latin America and the fourth-largest in the world. Some 75.2% of the population aged 20 or older is either overweight or obese, government data shows, up from 71.3% six years earlier.

"With the pandemic, the problem is becoming even bigger, unfortunately," said Dr. Jose Luis Mora, who specializes in heart diseases and microbiology at the country's Social Security Institute for State Workers.

"The government is telling us that we shouldn't worry but all the same we don't see fast actions aimed at controlling the pandemic," Mora said, adding that the prevalence of people with underlying health conditions has not featured in government plans.

Unlike regional peers, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has not ordered a lockdown or other drastic measures to control spread of the coronavirus due to concerns the country's already slumping economy would take an even bigger hit.

<https://news.trust.org/item/20200326195209-a8sl7>

Researcher Avila said Mexico should have acted more firmly years ago to encourage its population to change diets. Recently, companies have stopped government dietary health initiatives in the courts.

"Mexicans are now dying because of their poor eating habits," Avila said. "Mexico has to pay the price for not having done anything more meaningful earlier, it should have acted a long time ago."

(Reporting by Stefanie Eschenbacher and Adriana Barrera; Editing by Frank Jack Daniel and Bill Berkrot)