
Statement By Honourable Vincent Wheatley On World Obesity Day 2025

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MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

WORLD OBESITY DAY 2025

TUESDAY 4th MARCH 2025

Today, 4th March 2025, the Virgin Islands joins the global community in observing World Obesity Day under the theme “Changing Systems, Healthier Lives.” This theme underscores the need to address the broader systems that contribute to obesity, such as health policies, food environments, and societal behaviours, rather than focusing solely on personal choices.

Obesity is a serious public health issue in the Virgin Islands. The 2009 WHO STEPS survey, although dated, revealed that 67% of women and 50% of men in the Territory were overweight or obese. The main contributing factors were poor diets, insufficient physical activity, and high alcohol consumption. The survey also showed that nearly 90% of persons were not getting sufficient physical activity, and over 80% did not eat sufficient fruits and vegetables.

These risk factors increase the prevalence of chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in our Territory and place significant strain on individuals, families, and the healthcare system. More recent data from 2021 highlights the ongoing impact, showing that 8.7% of the population is affected by diabetes. This only serves to reinforce the strong connection between obesity and chronic diseases.

To reduce obesity and related noncommunicable diseases, the Ministry of Health and Social Development is working on several key areas.

- We are strengthening Healthcare Services by working with the BVI Health Services Authority (BVIHSA) to ensure that nutritional counselling is available at the hospital and community settings to help residents make informed dietary decisions.
- Additionally, we are collaborating with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to implement the HEARTS and HEARTS-D technical programme, initially within the Public Healthcare System, with plans to expand it further to our colleagues in the Private Sector. The PAHO HEARTS programme, which stands for “Health Education to Reduce Cardiovascular Risks”, is an initiative aimed to improve cardiovascular health across the Americas. It strengthens primary healthcare systems to better prevent and manage cardiovascular diseases through the effective control of hypertension and integrating cardiovascular risk management into routine primary care practices. The HEARTS-D element specifically focuses on the diagnosis and management of type 2 diabetes within the broader HEARTS framework.

The Ministry of Health and Social Development through the Public Health Unit, will also collaborate with food importers and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries to reduce trans fats and sugars in the food supply, making healthier options more accessible and affordable and ensuring that the public is sufficiently aware.

In addition, the Ministry of Health and Social Development's BVI Moves initiative promotes regular exercise, but opportunities extend beyond government programmes. Residents are encouraged to take advantage of public parks, gyms, sports clubs, and recreational spaces to maintain active lifestyles. In collaboration with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, BVIHSA, and H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (HLSCC), the Ministry of Health and Social Development is finalising national nutritional guidelines to promote healthier eating habits across all life stages to be launched later this year.

Every resident of the Territory has a role to play in improving their health. Small, consistent changes can have a lasting impact. This can include reducing sugar intake by drinking water instead of juice or soft drinks, moderating carbohydrates, and increasing fibre and essential nutrients by consuming at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Residents are also urged to commit to at least 30 minutes of physical activity, at least four times a week.

On this World Obesity Day, let us unite in a collective effort to implement systemic changes that promote healthier lives for all while encouraging personal responsibility. By working together, government, businesses, healthcare providers, and individuals we can reverse obesity trends and build a healthier future for the Virgin Islands.