

Author: Qatar  
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Qatar, an emirate with its capital Doha, is a peninsula located in the Arabian Gulf with a sole border to the South with Saudi Arabia. It is a monarchy headed by an Emir from Al Thani family which had been ruling since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Qatar gained its independence from the British patronage in 1971. Shortly after, it became a member of the United Nations. It is also a member of the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), as well as The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Our country is one of the smaller countries in the region with an area of 11,586 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 2.1 million. The main income comes from exporting petroleum and liquefied natural gas. In fact, Qatar has the third highest reserve of gas in the world. These natural resources helped in its economic growth and development. Currently, it is ranked the richest country in the world as its GDP per capita is 145,894 dollars. In addition, the unemployment rate has never surpassed 9% of the population. Because of its oil and gas wealth, the country's residents enjoy a high standard of living a well-established system of social services.

With a Human Development Index of 0.85 in 2014, Qatar has a very good quality of life. Wealth and employment are not the only factors that contribute to the quality of life. There is the environment, physical and mental health, education, recreation, leisure time, and social belonging. However, while our country became one of the richest countries in the world it also developed one of the worst eating habits.

Qatar is the second most obese country in the Gulf region, and the 6<sup>th</sup> most obese among teenagers around the world. The rates of this disorder had been increasing since the 1980s. The country witnessed a great modernization in the last 30 years. This economic growth produced an explosion of malls, restaurants and fast food chains, such as McDonalds and KFC. In addition, the fast pace of lifestyle, that is dominating the globe nowadays (including Qatar), is causing more and more people to choose to eat out or order in rather than cook a healthy meal. Furthermore, the ubiquity of fast food chains is making it much more accessible to everyone. Also, Qatar has adopted a western dietary pattern which contains a lot of red meat, high fat dairy products, desserts and high sugar drinks. On top of that, like its neighboring countries, the luxurious way of life which depends on drivers, housemaids and private staff, does not allow physical activity nor movement. All these factors created a new social environment known as the obesogenic environment. It encourages people to eat unhealthily and not do enough exercise, which leads to obesity.

Obesity is a condition that is characterized by excessive accumulation and storage of fat in the body. A person is considered overweight when his or her Body Mass Index (BMI) is between 25-29kg/m<sup>2</sup>. If the BMI is equal or higher than 30kg/m<sup>2</sup>, then the person is defined as obese. According to The World Health Organization, 41% of the people are obese in Qatar. Studies show that Qatar has the 6<sup>th</sup> highest rate of obesity and overweight among 14 to 20-year-old boys in the Middle East and North Africa region with 57% of the Qataris. Also, the obesity rate among women is higher: 59% of the Qatari women. Obesity increases the chances of various diseases, such as hypertension, cancers, cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes. As a matter of fact, around 16% of the country is diabetic, ranking 6<sup>th</sup> in the world.

The magnitude of the issue requires immediate and serious intervention. Several initiatives had already been taken, for instance, the World Innovation Summit for Health founded in 1995 by the Emir at the time, which mission is an educational, scientific and community development. Additionally, in 2010, the Supreme Councils of Education and Health launched the School Health Initiative that attempts to improve the health of the students through education. These ongoing programs had spread awareness but had been partially successful. Thousands of residents in Qatar are turning to radical weight loss surgeries for help. Many doctors and surgeons are performing different types of procedures such as gastric bypass and sleeve. In fact, Qatar was the first country in the region to cover bariatric surgery under its National Health Insurance Scheme. In the Hamad General Hospital, 5 to 10 weight loss operations are performed on a daily basis.

Qatar's economic growth, modern technology and harsh climate are some of the main causes that lead to obesity. However, the schools, the government and our community should be committed and willing to change their unhealthy lifestyle in order to decrease the obesity rates. Education from a young age can help develop healthier attitudes and understanding of the importance of diet and physical activities. It will also help understand and learn about the many diseases caused by obesity. Therefore, it is important to integrate health education in schools. While there is clearly no lack of awareness of a national obesity problem among government and medical professionals, it remains unknown whether this understanding, and the inevitable diet changes that accompany it, has filtered through to our general population.