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World Birth Defects Day

3 March 2026

World Birth Defects Day (WBDD), observed annually on 3 March, raises awareness of birth defects and their impact on individuals, families and healthcare systems worldwide. The day highlights the importance of prevention where possible, early diagnosis, improved access to care and ongoing research.

Birth defects - also known as congenital disorders - are structural or functional conditions that develop before birth. They are a leading cause of infant and under-five mortality in many countries. Children who survive serious birth defects may experience lifelong health challenges or disability.

What Are Birth Defects?

Birth defects can affect almost any part of the body and vary in severity from mild to life-threatening. They are generally classified into two main categories:

- **Structural birth defects** - These involve physical abnormalities in body parts or organs. Examples include cleft lip and palate, spina bifida and certain congenital heart defects.
- **Functional or developmental birth defects** - These affect how a body system works and may involve metabolic, neurological or genetic conditions. Some may not be immediately visible at birth and may only become apparent later in life.

What Causes Birth Defects?

For more than half of all birth defects, the exact cause is unknown. However, several factors are known to increase risk:

- **Genetic factors:** Changes in genes or chromosomes can lead to conditions such as down syndrome or fragile X syndrome.

- **Maternal infections:** Certain infections during pregnancy may increase risk.
- **Exposure to substances:** Alcohol, tobacco, certain medications and harmful chemicals during pregnancy are associated with higher risk.
- **Chronic maternal health conditions:** Conditions such as diabetes or epilepsy require careful management during pregnancy.
- **Obesity and advanced maternal age:** Both have been associated with increased risk of certain birth defects.

It is important to note that many birth defects occur without any identifiable risk factors.

The South African Context

In South Africa, the latest estimate of birth defects is approximately 49 per 1000 births or one in 20 births, which equates to 55,000 babies born each year with a congenital condition. This underscores the importance of awareness, early detection, appropriate healthcare services and support systems for affected families.

Raising Awareness, Supporting Families

World Birth Defects Day serves as a reminder of the need for continued research, strengthened healthcare systems and equitable access to screening and care. Increased awareness can contribute to improved outcomes and reduced stigma for those living with congenital conditions.

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World Obesity Day

4 March 2026

World Obesity Day highlights one of the most pressing global health challenges of our time. Current projections indicate that by 2035, nearly half of the world's population - close to four billion people - could be living with overweight or obesity.

Obesity affects people of all ages. Rates among children and adolescents have increased dramatically over the past five decades, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Childhood obesity often continues into adulthood and is associated with an increased risk of non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.

A Complex Global Health Issue

Obesity does not occur in isolation. It is influenced by a combination of biological, social, environmental and economic factors that reflects a global shift in nutrition, lifestyle patterns and living environments.

Importantly, obesity is a chronic, relapsing condition shaped by many interconnected drivers. Simplifying it to a single cause can make prevention and management more difficult.

Understanding the Root Causes

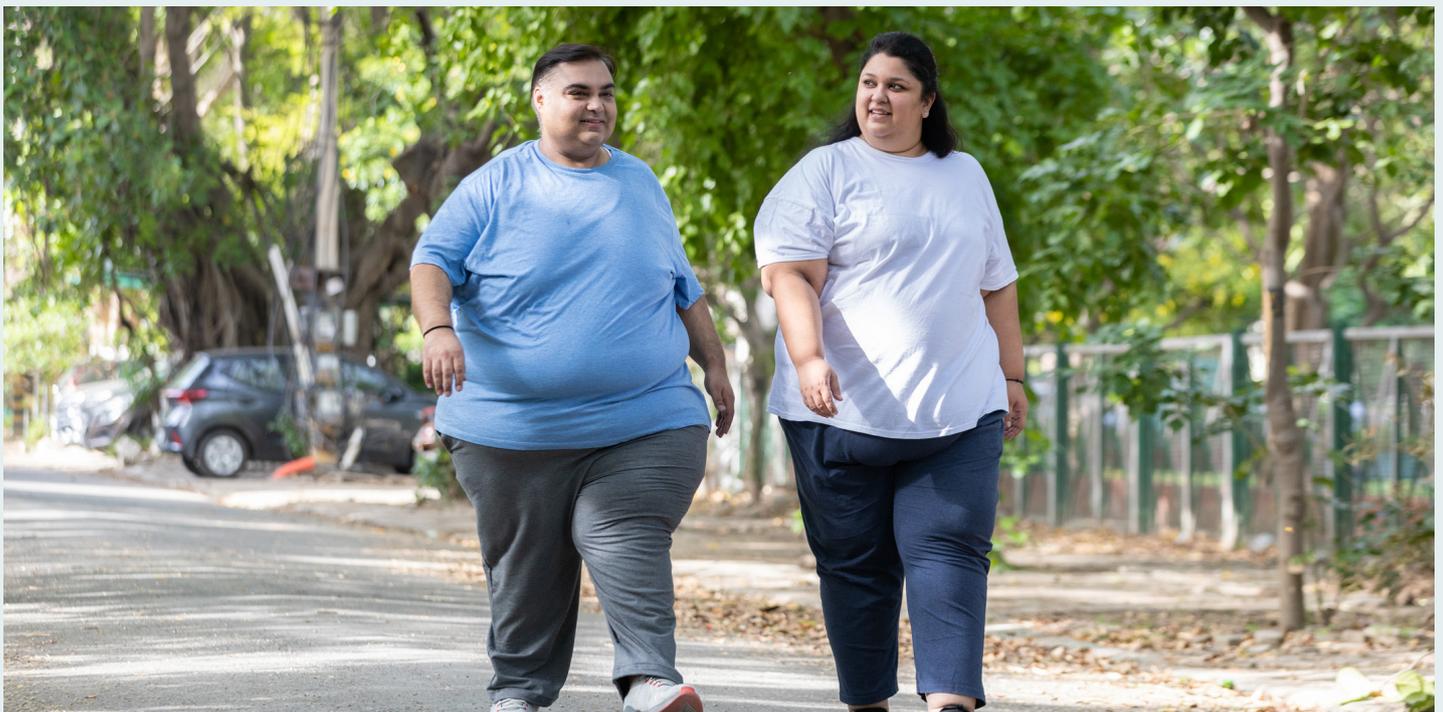
Addressing obesity requires acknowledging the broader systems that shape health outcomes. Key contributing factors include:

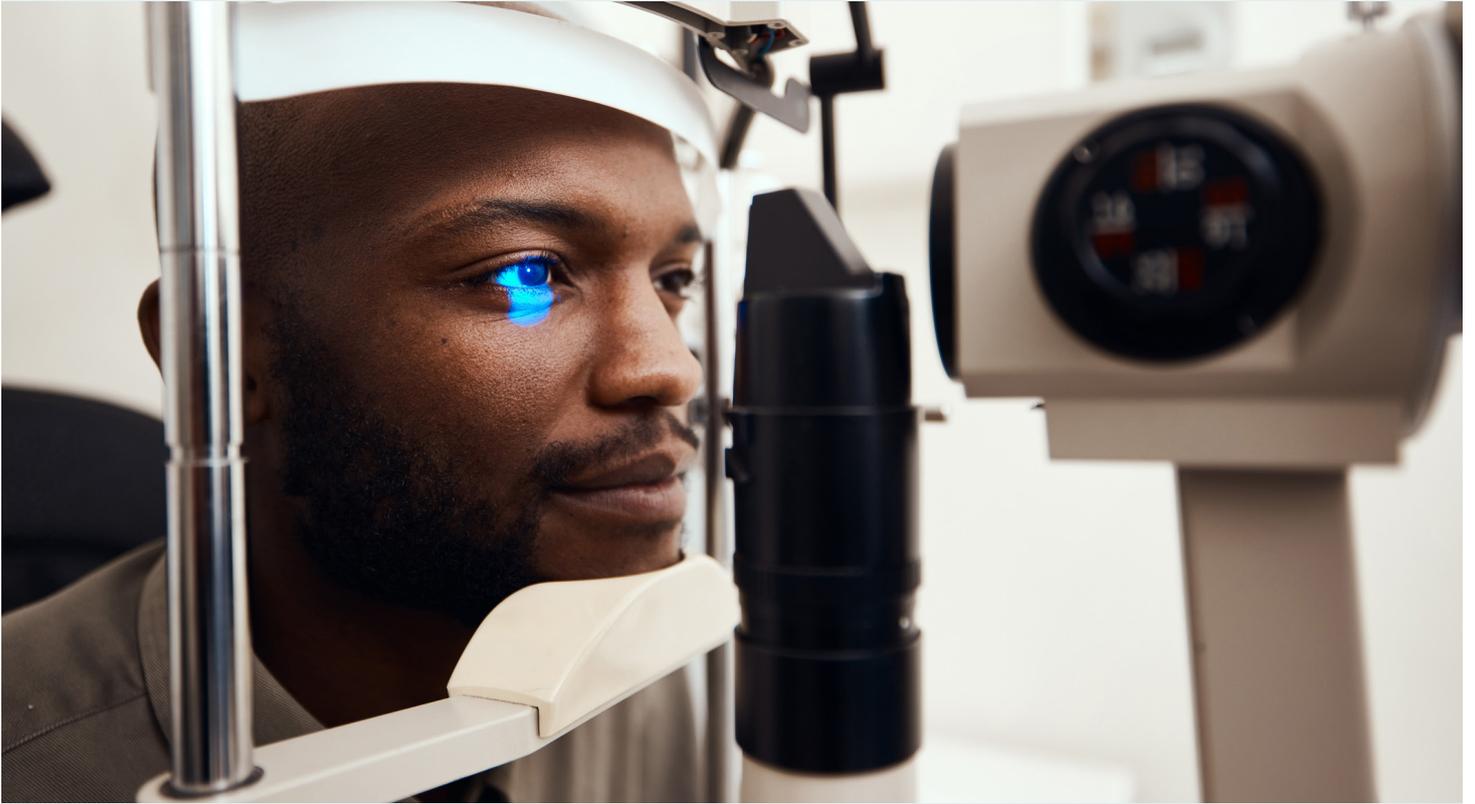
- **Biology:** The body has natural mechanisms designed to protect against starvation, which can make sustained weight loss challenging.
- **Genetics:** Genetic factors may account for 40–70% of an individual's susceptibility.

- **Food environments:** Increased availability of ultra-processed foods and changing dietary patterns contribute to rising rates globally.
- **Healthcare access:** Limited access to trained healthcare professionals and long-term support can affect outcomes.
- **Mental health:** Some mental health conditions and related medications are associated with weight gain.
- **Life stages and events:** Pregnancy, early development, illness and certain medications can influence weight over time.
- **Sleep and stress:** Disrupted sleep patterns and chronic stress can affect hormonal balance and weight regulation.
- **Marketing and food systems:** The promotion and accessibility of certain food products play a role in population-level trends.
- **Stigma:** Weight bias and discrimination can negatively affect mental wellbeing and access to care.

Obesity is shaped by environments, systems and social determinants - not simply individual choices. Reducing stigma, improving access to evidence-based care, supporting healthier food systems and strengthening public health strategies are essential steps in changing the trajectory.

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World Glaucoma week (12 Day)

8 - 14 March 2026

World Glaucoma Week is a global awareness initiative focused on protecting vision through early detection and education.

Glaucoma is a chronic, progressive condition that damages the optic nerve - the structure responsible for transmitting visual information from the eye to the brain. Over time, this damage can lead to permanent vision loss. Glaucoma is one of the leading causes of irreversible blindness worldwide.

Understanding Glaucoma

An estimated 80 million people globally are living with glaucoma. Importantly, many are unaware they have the condition. In its early stages, glaucoma typically presents with no noticeable symptoms. Vision loss often occurs gradually and may not be detected until significant damage has already occurred.

If left untreated, glaucoma can progress to permanent blindness. However, with early diagnosis and appropriate management, vision loss can often be slowed or prevented.

While glaucoma can affect anyone, certain factors are associated with increased risk:

- Age over 40, with risk rising significantly after 60
- A family history of glaucoma
- Certain ethnic backgrounds
- Elevated eye pressure
- Other underlying health conditions

Family members of individuals with glaucoma have a substantially higher likelihood of developing the condition themselves.

The Importance of Regular Eye Examinations

Because glaucoma may be asymptomatic in its early stages, routine eye examinations play a critical role in early detection. General guidance often recommends:

- Before age 40: Eye examination every 2–4 years
- Ages 40–60: Every 2–3 years
- After age 60: Every 1–2 years

Early identification allows for timely intervention aimed at preserving vision and reducing the risk of significant visual impairment.

Protecting Sight Through Awareness

World Glaucoma Week serves as a reminder that vision loss from glaucoma is preventable in many cases through awareness and regular eye care. Strengthening understanding of risk factors and encouraging routine screening can help reduce the global burden of irreversible blindness.

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Ending TB with Awareness

World TB Day – 24 March 2026

World TB Day raises awareness of the global impact of tuberculosis (TB). The date marks the 1882 discovery of the bacterium that causes TB - a milestone that paved the way for diagnosis and treatment.

More than a century later, TB remains one of the world's leading infectious causes of death. According to the World Health Organisation, millions of people develop TB each year, and more than a million lives are lost annually. While global efforts have saved tens of millions of lives since 2000, progress has slowed in many regions, and significant challenges remain.

Tuberculosis Defined

Tuberculosis is an infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. It most commonly affects the lungs (pulmonary TB), but it can also affect other parts of the body. TB spreads through the air when a person with active pulmonary TB coughs, speaks or sings. Prolonged close contact increases the risk of transmission. It is important to know that not everyone infected with TB becomes ill. In many cases, the immune system contains the bacteria.

If a person is infected with TB but it is latent, the bacteria are present but inactive and the person will show no symptoms and are not contagious. When TB disease is active within a person, the bacteria multiply and cause illness, most often affecting the lungs and can spread to others if untreated.

Common Symptoms of Active TB

Symptoms typically develop gradually and may include:

- Persistent cough lasting several weeks
- Chest pain

- Coughing up blood or sputum
- Fever and night sweats
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fatigue

Because these symptoms can resemble other respiratory illnesses, ongoing or worsening symptoms should be assessed by a healthcare professional.

Ongoing Challenges

Drug-resistant TB remains a significant global concern. These strains do not respond to standard treatment and require longer, more complex therapy. Addressing TB effectively depends on strong health systems, early diagnosis, access to treatment, preventive strategies and continued research.

Ending TB is not only a public health priority but also a development goal linked to improved living conditions, nutrition and equitable access to healthcare. World TB Day serves as a reminder that sustained commitment, collaboration and investment are essential to reducing the global burden of tuberculosis.

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References

World Birth Defects Day

For more information, visit: www.worldbirthdefectsday.org

World Obesity Day

For additional information and resources, visit: www.worldobesityday.org

World Glaucoma Week

For more information, visit: www.worldglaucomaweek.org

World Tuberculosis Day

For more information, please visit: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/tuberculosis>

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