

## Kenya declared free of sleeping sickness: A major milestone in public health

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has validated Kenya as having eliminated human African trypanosomiasis (HAT), also known as sleeping sickness, as a public health problem—making it the tenth country to achieve this milestone. HAT is the second neglected tropical disease (NTD) to be eliminated in Kenya, after Guinea worm disease in 2018.

HAT is caused by the blood parasite *Trypanosoma brucei* and is transmitted through the bite of infected tsetse flies. The rhodesiense form (r-HAT), the only type present in Kenya, progresses rapidly, invades vital organs including the brain, and is fatal within weeks without treatment. Rural communities relying on agriculture, fishing, and livestock are most at risk.

The first cases in Kenya were detected in the early 20th century. Since then, the country has conducted consistent control efforts, with no indigenous cases reported for over 10 years. The last local case was in 2009, with the final two exported cases in 2012.

To sustain elimination, Kenya strengthened surveillance in 12 health facilities across six historically endemic counties, equipping them with diagnostics and training staff. Surveillance of tsetse flies and animal trypanosomiasis is ongoing, supported by the Kenya Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis Eradication Council (KENTTEC).

WHO praised Kenya's achievement, with Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus calling it "another step towards making Africa free of neglected tropical diseases." Kenya will now implement post-validation monitoring, supported by WHO and partners, to prevent resurgence.

Kenya joins Benin, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Guinea, Rwanda, Togo, and Uganda in eliminating HAT as a public health problem—a testament to long-term commitment, intersectoral collaboration, and sustained investment in health systems.

SOURCE: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION



# BEYOND THE PLATE

## Rethinking the balanced diet for body, budget, and belonging

RAISA MEHZABEEN

In an age where food trends go viral before facts are verified, the concept of a "balanced diet" remains both fundamental and misunderstood. For decades, we have been told to "eat right" — yet our understanding of what that means has become increasingly complicated.

The American Heart Association (AHA) recently offered five refreshing perspectives on what it really means to eat a balanced diet. These insights are not only practical but also rooted in health equity and emotional well-being.

**1. Reimagine your plate — visually and nutritionally:** Forget the food pyramid. Visualise your plate as a simple circle: half filled with fruits and vegetables, a quarter with whole grains, and the remaining quarter with lean protein sources. This model is not just easier to remember—it is grounded in nutrition science. A colourful plate ensures a diverse nutrient profile, providing fibre, vitamins, antioxidants, and essential amino acids. Use heart-healthy plant-based oils and herbs instead of salt to boost flavour without increasing your risk for hypertension or cardiovascular disease.

**2. Avoid the illusion of quick fixes:** Many of today's trending diets offer promises they can not keep. Keto, carnivore, juice cleanses — these extremes may yield temporary results but often at the cost of sustainability and health. As the AHA rightly notes, these should be approached with caution. Supplements have their place, especially for individuals with clinical deficiencies, but they should never replace real food. The World Health Organisation (WHO) consistently emphasises a food-first approach to nutrition for long-term wellness.



**3. Balanced eating can be budget-friendly:** Contrary to popular belief, eating well does not have to break the bank. Frozen and canned fruits and vegetables, if chosen wisely (without added sugars or sodium), can be just as nutritious as their fresh counterparts. Seasonal and locally available produce often offers the best value and nutrient density.

Organisations like the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health support community-based food access strategies — such as buying in bulk and using coupons — as key ways to improve nutrition among low-income households.

**4. Diversity is your dietary superpower:** No single food holds the key to good health. Whether you prefer chickpeas over kidney beans or apples over mangoes, the principle remains: variety ensures balance. Embracing personal preferences makes healthy eating more enjoyable and sustainable. Cultural diversity in food should be celebrated, not sidelined. After all, lentils in South Asia, quinoa in Latin America, and yams in West Africa all reflect nutrient-

rich, traditional diets that have supported communities for centuries.

**5. Rediscover the joy of eating together:** Health is not just a physical state — it is emotional and social too. Cooking and sharing meals with loved ones fosters not only stronger bonds but also better food habits. Children who eat meals with their families are more likely to have better nutrition, fewer behavioural problems, and a lower risk of obesity, according to the American Academy of Paediatrics. Eating well is not a solo journey — it thrives on support, celebration, and shared commitment.

In essence, a "balanced diet" is less about rules and more about relationships — with our bodies, our food, and each other. It does not demand perfection, just presence. So instead of chasing the next trendy fix, let us focus on what nourishes us—physically, emotionally, and culturally.

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### THE HIDDEN NUTRITION BATTLE

## When calcium supplements block your iron

Millions of people—especially elderly women—take calcium supplements daily to protect their bones. But few realise that this well-intentioned habit can quietly trigger another serious problem: iron deficiency anaemia.

It is a hidden paradox. Calcium is essential for bone strength, while iron keeps our blood healthy and oxygen flowing. Yet, when taken together, calcium and iron compete for absorption in the same part of the small intestine. And in this silent contest, calcium often wins—reducing iron absorption from your meal by more than half.

**How it happens:** Calcium carbonate can unintentionally interfere with the body's natural processing of another vital nutrient—iron. Both calcium and dietary iron (especially non-heme iron from plant foods) are absorbed in the same section of the small intestine. When taken together, calcium wins the battle, cutting iron absorption from around 10.2% to just 4.8% in a single meal.

**A real-life scenario:** Imagine you have just enjoyed a fresh salad bowl rich in green leafy vegetables or a beetroot smoothie to boost your iron. Immediately after, you take your daily calcium supplement. Inside your body, a silent tug-of-war begins—one that leaves your iron intake defeated. Over time, this can lead to chronic anaemia, fatigue, and weakness.

**What can we do?** The solution starts with awareness.

- Do not take calcium supplements with iron-rich meals.
- Keep a 2-3 hour gap between calcium and iron intake.
- Follow your doctor's or nutritionist's timing instructions closely.

This small change can make a big difference to your nutrient status—and ultimately, your health.

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# CONQUERING OBESITY

## Simple strategies for a healthier you

STAR HEALTH DESK

Obesity is a growing health concern worldwide, affecting millions of people and contributing to a range of serious health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and joint problems. While managing obesity can feel overwhelming, it is important to recognise that small, consistent changes in lifestyle can lead to significant improvements. From healthier eating habits and increased physical activity to better sleep and stress management, taking a holistic approach can help individuals not only lose weight but also enhance overall well-being.

**1. Start slow and set realistic goals:** Losing weight is a gradual process. Set small, achievable goals like losing 1-2 pounds per week. This can help prevent feelings of frustration and make weight loss more sustainable in the long term. Breaking down larger goals into smaller milestones can help keep you motivated and focused.

**2. Focus on healthy, balanced meals:** A balanced diet is key. Aim to include plenty of fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains in your meals. Reducing processed foods, sugary drinks, and high-fat snacks can have a significant impact on your weight. Portion control is also important—eating in moderation is just as vital as eating nutritious foods.

**3. Stay active:** Exercise is crucial for



both weight loss and overall health. You do not need an intense workout routine to start; simple activities like walking, swimming, or cycling can be effective. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week. Over time, try to increase intensity and duration as your fitness level improves.

**4. Prioritise sleep:** Lack of sleep can contribute to weight gain by affecting your hormones and appetite. Aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep each night. Proper rest supports metabolic function and can help curb cravings for unhealthy foods.

**5. Manage stress:** Stress can lead to emotional eating or overeating. Practising stress-management techniques like deep breathing,

meditation, or yoga can help reduce stress and its impact on your eating habits. Finding healthy ways to cope with stress is crucial for weight management.

**6. Seek professional support:** If needed, consider seeking support from healthcare professionals like a nutritionist, therapist, or doctor. They can provide personalised advice and help you develop a plan that is safe and effective for your specific needs.

**7. Build a support system:** Having a support system of friends, family, or even online groups can make a big difference. Surround yourself with people who encourage your goals and hold you accountable. Support from others can provide motivation and make the journey easier.

**8. Stay hydrated:** Drinking enough water throughout the day is often overlooked but plays a key role in weight management. Sometimes, our bodies confuse thirst with hunger, leading to overeating. Drinking water before meals can help you feel full, reducing the chances of overeating. Additionally, staying hydrated supports digestion and boosts metabolism.

Managing obesity is about making consistent, small changes over time. Focus on a balanced approach, and do not be discouraged by setbacks. Every step toward healthier habits is progress.

# Partnering for nutrition: Scaling impact through inclusive market systems

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What measurable outcomes have emerged from SMC's market-based nutrition initiatives, particularly among low-income households and mothers with young children?

**Toslim Uddin Khan (TUK):** Nutrition is central to SMC's mandate, particularly maternal and child nutrition. We distribute around 50 million sachets of micro nutrient powder (MNP) annually for children under five, developed multiple micronutrient supplements (MMS) for pregnant women to help reduce underweight births, and have recently introduced a fortified biscuit containing the same nutrients. We run activities in 137 upazilas where we mobilise communities, hold group meetings, and conduct adolescent school programmes.

**TDS:** How does SMC's mission fit within health sector development in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to national family planning, maternal and child health?

**TUK:** Our mission is to improve the health and well-being of women, children, and families, in line with national goals on family planning, maternal health, and child health. Around half of all contraceptive users in Bangladesh rely on SMC products, including oral pills, injectables, and condoms. Joya, our sanitary napkin brand, holds almost 52 percent of the market, while SMC ORS (oral rehydration solution) has around 90 percent market share.

**TDS:** How does SMC ensure that nutrition products and campaigns are affordable, locally resonant, and effectively reach last-mile consumers in both urban and rural contexts?

**TUK:** Our Blue Star network has around 13,000 non-graduate providers. Green Star Programme includes 5,500 medicine and drug sellers. Pink Star Programme has 612 graduate providers, mostly obstetricians and

gynaecologists. Rose Star network has 355 paediatricians offering nutrition counselling and growth monitoring for children under five. SMC's community-level Gold Star Programme involves 4,000 rural and semi-urban women entrepreneurs, including 132 community paramedics, who share health information, provide public health services, and sell SMC products directly to households.



of pregnant women get antenatal check-ups, and exclusive breastfeeding is at 53 percent. Tackling these issues needs strong community engagement, better infrastructure, and focused policy action.

Sustainability is another concern. Many local health programmes depend on external funding, which risks disruption if grants stop. We need stronger market-based models and more local production of health and nutrition products to reduce reliance on imports.

**TDS:** In what ways have development partnerships with

**Toslim Uddin Khan**  
Managing Director  
and CEO, SMC

iDE supported SMC's mission — particularly in community education, outreach innovation, and co-creating nutrition demand?

**TUK:** We see iDE as a respected INGO with strong technical expertise in many countries. With our nationwide network and iDE's technical support, our activities will play a more effective role in strengthening Bangladesh's health system. We are planning to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with iDE soon.

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iDE, a global nonprofit organisation in 12 countries since 1984, drives poverty reduction through market-driven solutions in Bangladesh, scaling agriculture, WASH, climate resilience, clean energy, and women's empowerment.

**TDS:** What role have public-private partnerships played in enhancing the efficiency, sustainability, and inclusivity of nutrition supply chains across Bangladesh?

**TUK:** SMC works with government entities like DGFP, DGHS, development organisations, and private sector providers to ensure that products reach even the most remote parts of the country. For example, ORS was once a prescription-only medicine, but the government allowed sales through non-pharma outlets. That single policy shift dramatically expanded access and contributed to the sharp decline in diarrhoeal deaths among children under 5.

**TDS:** What are the challenges in the health and nutrition sector that you have come across, and what remedies do you suggest to address them?

**TUK:** Half of girls marry before 18, around 4,000 maternal deaths happen each year, only 41 percent

## MANAGING COPD

### Easy-to-follow inhaler therapy tips for 2025

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a lung condition that requires proper treatment to manage breathing problems and flare-ups. The 2025 GOLD guidelines focus on using the right inhaler therapies based on your symptoms and how often you experience flare-ups.

For people with mild symptoms or fewer flare-ups (Group A), a single inhaler, either a long-acting bronchodilator (LAMA or LABA), is usually enough to control symptoms. For those with more severe symptoms or frequent flare-ups (Groups B and E), a

combination inhaler with both LABA and LAMA is recommended.

If someone continues to feel short of breath despite using one inhaler, it is time to move to a combination therapy. Switching inhalers or medications may also be necessary if symptoms do not improve. In addition to medication, treatments like pulmonary rehabilitation can help improve breathing and overall health.

For people who have frequent flare-ups, doctors will look at a blood test result called eosinophil count. Higher levels may require adding inhaled corticosteroids

(ICS) to the treatment. For lower levels, sticking to a combination inhaler might be enough, but if flare-ups continue, additional medications like roflumilast or azithromycin may help.

It is important to adjust treatment as needed. If you are on ICS and have had side effects, your doctor might suggest reducing the dose, but this should be done carefully to avoid flare-ups.

The key to managing COPD effectively is adjusting the treatment to meet your specific needs, helping you breathe easier and feel better.