

CARIBBEAN WELLNESS DAY 2017

Message from Dr C. James Hospedales, Executive Director, Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA)

Youth is a crucial period for establishing positive health and social behaviours. It is a time when young persons aged 15-29 years, transition from childhood through adolescence to independent adulthood. It is a period when they undergo emotional and physical changes. Although our Caribbean youths are generally healthy, a growing number of factors influence their health. These include family and community, environmental factors, socioeconomic factors, and health factors such as communicable diseases, violence and injury, body weight, physical activity, nutrition and substance use.

Poor health in this group can be detrimental to national economies, through direct economic losses for treatment and indirect costs of lost productivity. It is therefore critical that the health and well-being of our young people are promoted and protected as a critical ingredient to the social, health and productivity agendas for the Region. It is with this in mind that Caribbean Wellness Day (CWD) 2017 focuses on the Youth under the theme **“Securing a Future Generation through Eating Healthy and Not Smoking.”**

Statistics show that more than 30% of our Caribbean adolescents are overweight or obese, and risk developing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as hypertension, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular diseases later in life; higher health costs; and difficulty in jobs and relationships. Developing healthy eating and exercise habits during adolescence and not smoking will form a fine foundation for good health into adulthood. Reducing weight-related health issues is a priority for CARPHA as illustrated in the [Plan for Action for Promoting Healthy Weights](#). The Plan supports measures to effect change at the individual and community levels, as well as to provide medical, health and family support for the child, who is already affected by overweight/obesity.

CARPHA aims to stop and reverse the rise in obesity in our young people by 2025, and is working with Member States and Regional and international partners to support national implementation to achieve this. Measures such as: mandatory nutritional labelling to empower consumers; getting unhealthy foods out of schools; promoting the consumption of local fruits and vegetables; reducing marketing of unhealthy foods and fast foods to children, will ensure that Caribbean youth live and learn and play in environments that are supportive of physical activity and healthy eating.

Teens and youth are vulnerable to the deadly, addictive effects of tobacco. Smoking at an early age increases the risk of heart disease, asthma and bronchitis, high blood pressure, diabetes, addiction to nicotine, and the associated risk of other substance abuse. Young people should be also aware that smoking accelerates ageing of their bodies and their skin. National implementations can assist with prevention and cessation of youth smoking, thus protecting our youth from the epidemic of tobacco-related diseases and unnecessary expense. These actions

include higher taxes on tobacco; smoke-free spaces and bans on tobacco advertising. Some of which have been implemented in by a few CARICOM countries but we have a long way to go to have the region be a tobacco free zone.

CWD will be observed across the Region on Saturday 9th September. This annual event launched in 2008, has raised the profile of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which continue to severely and adversely impact the health, economy and development of the Caribbean. CARPHA will continue to work closely with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Institutions of the Community to create the needed alliances between governments, academia, civil society to help to shape regional and country-level policy and programmes that address the epidemic of chronic diseases, the roots of which begin in early life, and to support region-wide, sustained information and education of the public.

CARPHA also continues to spearhead Caribbean Wellness Day in Member States and has teamed with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) to support Member States in observing CWD. Wellness observances will continue from September 9-15 under the slogan “Let’s talk about our well-being”. Caribbean Wellness Week – a PAHO initiative - aims to promote mental well-being where we learn, work, play, and love.

We have an obligation to our young people. Investments in adolescent health and wellbeing will not only transform the lives of our Caribbean young men and women, but will also generate high economic returns. I urge policy makers, communities, the private sector, civil society and non-governmental organisations, media and academia, as well as every individual to act now: the costs are simply not sustainable. Let us encourage healthy practices during this transitional stage, and take steps to better protect our future generation from health risks. This is critical to the future of Region’s health and social infrastructure, and to the prevention of health problems in adulthood. Let’s act now!