

Q: What are noncommunicable diseases?

Noncommunicable diseases, commonly known as chronic or lifestyle-related diseases, include heart diseases and stroke, cancers, chronic lung diseases and diabetes. These diseases are the world's biggest killers and a leading cause of death in the Region (1), causing 1.7 million deaths every year.

Q: What is the impact of noncommunicable diseases?

Noncommunicable diseases represent a major burden to individuals, governments and societies. On the individual level, they cause premature death and severe disability among survivors. Noncommunicable diseases cut lives short, often claiming people at their most productive age. They can drive individuals into poverty due to lack of their productivity and the need to pay for medications and drugs for prolonged periods of time.

At a governmental level, noncommunicable diseases represent a huge burden that puts pressure on health systems and resources. They increase health care costs and out-of-pocket and catastrophic expenditure. This is especially challenging for low- and lower-middle-income countries, which constitute more than half of the countries in the Region. Ultimately, they undermine economic progressiveness and stifle growth for countries. On the societal level, they have detrimental socioeconomic consequences. In the Region, the impact is further amplified as a result of humanitarian and emergency crises (2).

Q: What is the burden of noncommunicable diseases in the Region?

The burden is huge and continues to grow. In 2012, noncommunicable diseases claimed over 2.2 million lives in the Region and caused 57% of mortality. Four groups of diseases – cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic lung disease – were responsible for 80% of this mortality; 65% of deaths were linked to risk factors. 60% of people with chronic diseases die young, under the age of 70 (8).

Heart diseases and stroke: It is estimated that 48% of deaths from chronic diseases in the Region are due to heart diseases. Deaths attributed to heart diseases (of total deaths) are 28% (3).

Cancers: It is estimated that 16% of deaths from chronic diseases in the Region are due to

cancer. Deaths attributed to cancer (of total deaths) are 9% (4).

Chronic lung diseases: It is estimated that 8% of deaths from chronic diseases in the Region are due to chronic lung disease. Deaths attributed to lung disease (of total deaths) are 4% (5).

Diabetes: It is estimated that 5% of deaths from chronic diseases in the Region are due to diabetes (6). Deaths attributed to diabetes (of total deaths) are 3% (7).

Q: What is the projected estimate of the burden of noncommunicable diseases in the Region?

The burden of noncommunicable diseases is progressively increasing. Future projections indicate there will be an alarming increase in their prevalence with the four main noncommunicable diseases causing as many as 2.4 million deaths in 2025, unless serious action is taken (1).

Q: What are the factors leading to the increased burden of noncommunicable diseases in the Region?

The four main chronic diseases are caused, to a large extent, by four common unhealthy behaviours, or risk factors – tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol. These unhealthy behaviours lead to four key metabolic/biological changes that increase the risk of noncommunicable diseases: raised blood pressure, overweight/obesity, high blood glucose levels/diabetes, and high levels of fat in the blood (7).

In the Region, social, political, economic, environmental, epidemiological and behavioural factors also contribute to the rising trends of noncommunicable diseases and risk factors and are key barriers to prevention and control. They include:

- financial instability that further reduces investment in health and health systems;
- emergency and humanitarian crises;
- high and increasing prevalence of tobacco smoking;
- globalization that promotes diets rich in calories, salt and fat;
- rapid urbanization that contributes to physical inactivity;
- obesity resulting from changes in healthy eating habits and reduction in physical activity;
- poverty that affects affordability of healthy food and health care;

- economic growth and industrialization that increase the levels of atmospheric air pollution;
- high levels of indoor and outdoor air pollution;
- business interests that promote the sale of unhealthy food and drinks to children;
- poverty and illiteracy that deprive people of opportunities and means to protect their health;
- lack of social responsibility of certain commercial entities that deprive the poor of essential medicines and technologies;
- population ageing (8).

However, noncommunicable diseases are preventable if unhealthy behaviours are modified. They are detectable and also treatable.

References

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