

Statement by WHO Representative in Iraq Dr Adham Ismail

Baghdad, Iraq, 15 November 2020 □ Iraq joins the international community in commemorating World Diabetes Day (14 November) to raise awareness of this chronic disease. This is important because more than 13.9% of adults in Iraq live with diabetes, and many do not know that they have the disease.

People with diabetes are at higher risk of severe illness when infected with COVID-19. Diabetes is the second cause of mortality in hospitalized COVID-19 patients in Iraq after cardiovascular diseases, making those with the disease more vulnerable to the severe effects of the virus. This calls for greater awareness of the dangers of this disease and information on how people can prevent and control diabetes.

Treatment of people with diabetes infected with COVID-19 can be more difficult as a result of fluctuations in blood glucose levels leading to possible complications. The immune system can become compromised making it harder to fight the COVID-19 virus and leading to longer recovery periods.

This year, the theme of World Diabetes Day 2020 is “Diabetes: nurses make the difference.” Nurses play an essential role in providing lifelong care for people with diabetes, including conducting screening and regular check-ups and providing psychological support and information on self-management and healthy living. According to Iraq’s 2019 Annual Statistical Report, nurses make up more than half of the health workforce in Iraq, but they often have a heavy workload, with an average of 22.5 nurses and midwives per 10 000 people.

At WHO, we are working with health authorities to provide diabetes screening services, essential health care packages, counselling and treatment at the primary health care level and greater access to services to prevent and manage diabetes using the WHO package of essential noncommunicable disease interventions (WHO PEN) for primary health care centres in low-resource settings and other technical packages. Iraq has adapted the WHO PEN protocol and trained health care workers to roll it out nationwide.

More than 80% of primary health care centres in Iraq provide hypertension and diabetes screening, 50% provide an essential noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) health care package and 40% provide counselling and treatment with the goal of reducing diabetes by 2030 as part of the NCD action plan to achieve the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

As the prevalence of diabetes increases in Iraq, greater investment is needed to include NCDs in essential health services to raise the priority given to NCDs in the national development plan, integrate prevention and control of NCDs at national level and ensure a constant supply of essential medicine like insulin.

A strong nursing workforce and other health care workers can make a difference in preventing and managing diabetes. They need training, equipment and service delivery conditions that create a conducive work environment.

We can all take action to prevent diabetes by maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including avoiding sugary drinks, processed foods, tobacco, and alcohol, and doing around three hours of physical activity every week, like walking, dancing, or playing sports. Everyone should also be aware of early symptoms of diabetes (excessive urination and thirst, constant hunger, weight loss, changes in vision, and fatigue) and seek care promptly.

Together we can beat diabetes!

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**Note to Editors:** Diabetes occurs when a person is unable to make enough insulin (type 1) or to use the insulin the pancreas produces (type 2), leading to high levels of blood sugar. Risk factors for diabetes include being overweight and physically inactive or having a family history of the disease. If left unmanaged, diabetes can result in severe complications, including kidney failure, stroke, lower-limb amputations, and blindness. Besides, for millions of low-income households, the costs of accessing lifelong care for diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases can push families into poverty.

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