

# The Growing Crisis of Noncommunicable Diseases in the South-East Asia Region

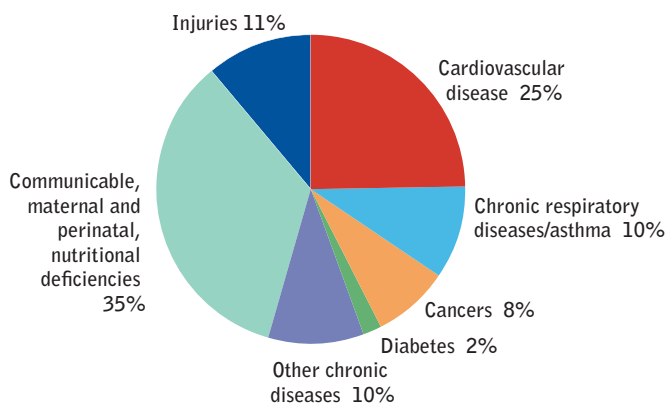
## Noncommunicable diseases: Why are they important?

- Four types of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) — cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases — contribute to the majority of global mortality.
- Four modifiable health-risk behaviours — tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol — are responsible for much of the illnesses and early deaths related to NCDs.
- These diseases are largely preventable through effective interventions that tackle common risk factors, and are frequently manageable through early detection, improved diet, exercise and treatment.

## NCDs are the top killers in the Region

- 22% of the global NCD deaths occur in the South-East Asia Region.
- 8 million people die of NCDs each year in the Region.
- 55% of all deaths in the Region are due to NCDs — in excess of deaths from communicable diseases, maternal, perinatal and nutritional causes put together (see *chart*).

Estimated percentage of deaths, by cause, SEA Region, 2005



- A 21% increase in NCD deaths is projected in the Region over the next 10 years.

## NCDs affect younger age groups in the Region

- Death rates in younger adults are higher in the SEA Region compared with those in more developed countries.
- 34% of NCD deaths in the Region occur among adults below 60 years of age, compared to 25% globally.

## NCDs affect the poor and further exacerbate poverty

- The poor are extensively exposed to the health-harming impacts of the environment and have less freedom and power to make healthy choices.
- Loss of household income among the poor occurs from unhealthy behaviours (such as tobacco and alcohol use), loss of productivity (due to disease, disability and premature death) and high out-of-pocket health-care expenditure (on treatment), thus exacerbating poverty.
- 40% of household expenditures for treating NCDs in India are financed through household borrowing and sale of assets.

## Major risk factors for NCDs are prevalent in the Region

- 8%–26% of all adults do not meet the recommendations for aerobic physical activity based on global guidelines.
- Nearly 250 million people smoke in the Region; an equal number use smokeless tobacco.
- 80% of the population does not eat sufficient quantities of fruits and vegetables.
- Childhood and adult obesity, key determinants of NCDs, are on the rise in the Region.

## NCDs are increasing health-care demands

- NCDs are dominating health-care needs in most countries in the Region as a result of the epidemiological and demographic transition.
- Health systems are currently ill equipped to tackle NCDs.
- Lack of access to affordable medicines and health-care services are also major causes of premature deaths due to NCDs.

## NCDs can be prevented

- NCDs can be prevented, delayed or alleviated through simple lifestyle changes.
- 80% of heart diseases and stroke, 80% of Type 2 diabetes and more than 30% of cancers can be prevented by eliminating common risk factors, namely poor diet, physical inactivity and smoking.
- 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week or its equivalent is estimated to reduce the risk of ischaemic heart disease by 30%, the risk of diabetes by 27% and the risk of breast and colon cancer by 21%–25%.

## Key challenges in the prevention and control of NCDs

- NCD prevention and control programmes remain largely neglected and underfunded at all levels.
- Globalization and economic development are fuelling the risk factors for NCDs through the availability of processed/high-energy foods and lack of opportunities for physical exercise.

- NCD prevention and control programmes are currently not included in the Millennium Development Goals, making them a low priority for national and international developmental partners.

## WHO's role in NCD control

Raising the priority of NCDs in health, development plans and initiatives is one of the key priorities of WHO's work. The Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (2000) and the global Action Plan (2008–2013) guide the work of WHO at the global level. The work of WHO SEARO in the area of NCDs in the Region is guided by the Regional NCD Framework, endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee in 2007. Key strategies include:

- Advocacy and raising awareness.
- Surveillance to map risk factors for NCDs.
- Primary prevention focusing on health promotion and legislation.
- Early disease detection and early treatment at the primary health care level.
- Evidence building through research.

## Partnerships are key

- Many determinants of NCDs lie outside the health sector. Addressing these risk factors requires the commitment and active involvement of the non-health sector, including planning, agriculture, industry, trade, finance and education. Action is also required by the private sector and civil society.
- Prevention and control of NCDs should be on everybody's agenda.

- **NCDs are a serious threat to ALL Member countries in the South-East Asia Region.**
- **Effective NCD control is cheaper than treatment for both governments and families. Prevention is key.**
- **Urgent actions are needed by all partners to prevent and control NCDs.**