

WHO outlines steps to reduce leading causes of death

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Deaths from noninfectious diseases are increasing, especially for low- and middle-income countries.

Story highlights

WHO: Countries should tax tobacco and alcohol, discourage smoking, salt and trans fats

They should also emphasize good diet, physical activity, health organization report says

Recommendations were released to cut heart disease, cancer, lung disease, diabetes

Not implementing interventions could cost countries \$7 trillion in 15 years, study says

To decrease deaths from noninfectious diseases, countries should pass excise taxes on tobacco and alcohol, encourage smoke-free public places, reduce salt and trans fat in foods, and increase awareness of diet and physical activity, according to a World Health Organization report.

The report, released Sunday, warned that people in rich and poor countries continue getting noninfectious diseases related to lifestyle and the use of tobacco and alcohol.

These diseases -- heart disease, cancer, lung disease and diabetes -- are not only the [leading killers in the world, with 36 million deaths a year](#), their economic toll can be devastating.

If these noncommunicable diseases flourish at their current rate, low- and middle-income nations could lose about \$7 trillion from 2011 to 2025. These estimates are

results from a World Economic Forum and Harvard School of Public Health study also released Sunday.

A 2009 survey of business leaders by the World Economic Forum called chronic disease one of the leading threats to global economic growth.

For only the second time in its history, the United Nations General Assembly, which is meeting this week, has put a health issue on its agenda. [Nations will meet Monday and Tuesday](#) to develop an international plan for preventing and controlling noncommunicable diseases.

The need for action is urgent, said Dr. Ala Alwan, assistant director-general for noncommunicable diseases and mental health at the WHO.

"The world is now recognizing the enormous health impact of noncommunicable diseases, particularly the four major groups: cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, diabetes. This is now emerging as a major social-economic problem as well," he said.

Deaths from noninfectious diseases are increasing, especially for low- and middle-income countries, some of which are grappling with other health issues such as malnourishment and infectious diseases.

"We know there are 100 million people who are pushed into poverty every year, because they have to pay directly for health care," Alwan said. "Most of the health care requirements are for noncommunicable diseases: cardiovascular disease, stroke, lung disease, diabetes or cancer."

These illnesses hurt household income for the affected individuals and their families, but also translate to loss of productivity and physical disability.

"When much of the work force is sick and dies in their productive years, national economies lose billions of dollars in output. And millions of families are pushed into poverty," Jean Pierre Rosso, managing director at the World Economic Forum, said in a news release.

The diseases also affect the United States, which spends \$2 trillion a year on health expenses, according to the WHO report.

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WHO grouped heart disease, cancer, lung disease and diabetes because these account for 80% of the deaths from noncommunicable diseases, and they share common risk factors. These include tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, physical inactivity and an unhealthy diet.

It recommended several public health steps to help countries take action such as discouraging smoking, reducing salt in foods and encouraging healthier habits.

The WHO studied 48 low- and middle-income countries all over the world over 10 years. The countries, such as Sri Lanka, Ukraine and Kenya, implemented measures such as salt reduction campaigns and tobacco control.

The measures resulted in a "considerable reduction" in the incidence of noncommunicable disease and death, Alwan said. He called these steps "best buys," because they cost little money and have the potential to "save literally millions of lives over the next 15 years."

These recommendations also include screening people who are at risk for heart disease, cervical cancer screenings and hepatitis B immunization to prevent liver cancer.

The cost of adopting these interventions in all low- and middle-income countries would be \$12 billion per year. Inaction would result in about \$7 trillion in losses over the next 15 years for these nations.

Unlike infectious diseases, these chronic diseases have been slow to get attention. The U.N.'s focus on the topic is much needed, said Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations think tank.

"It's a difficult thing to do, to frame it as something sexy that mobilized policy makers or society groups," he said. The pervasive thought is that, "this is a lifestyle disease. It's because of the lack of exercise, too much high-fat food, you deserve it. It's your problem."