



World Health  
Organization

# Saving lives, spending less:

the case for investing in  
noncommunicable diseases



## **Saving lives, spending less: the case for investing in noncommunicable diseases**

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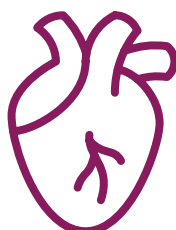
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# Investing in the Best Buys for Noncommunicable Diseases now means that by 2030:

Close to  
**7 million**  
lives saved



Nearly  
**10 million**  
cases of heart attack  
and stroke averted



**US\$ 230**  
**billion**  
in economic  
gains



This investment yields  
a return of:

**US\$ 7**  
for each dollar invested

\* For this analysis, 76 low- and lower-middle income countries were included. Relative to the original report published in 2018, there have been changes to the list of countries due to shifts in their income classification – Algeria, Belize, Iran (Islamic Republic of), and Samoa have been added, while Armenia, Georgia, Guatemala, Jordan, and Republic of Moldova have been dropped. The list also excludes the West Bank and Gaza, which is not a WHO Member State. Furthermore, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Eritrea, South Sudan, and the Syrian Arab Republic were excluded due to a lack of GDP data available to project prices. Kiribati has been excluded as insufficient baseline epidemiology was available.

## FOREWORD

# Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

## *Director-General, World Health Organization*

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and respiratory disease have long been the leading causes of premature mortality in high-income countries. What is less well-known is that 85% of all premature deaths from NCDs globally now happen in low- and middle-income countries. Not only does that have a devastating impact on families and communities, it also exacts a heavy toll on health budgets, social participation and productivity. The anticipated global financial impact of NCDs between 2010 and 2030 has been estimated to be as high as US\$ 47 trillion.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries were already at risk of missing their commitment to reduce premature NCD deaths by one third by 2030. COVID-19 has exacerbated this challenging situation. People with NCDs are at increased risk of severe disease and death from COVID-19, and the pandemic has also severely disrupted NCD prevention and treatment services. In a 2020 rapid assessment by WHO, nearly 75% of countries reported disruptions to NCD services due to the pandemic.

We know what needs to be done. WHO has identified significant health and economic returns through investment in key NCD Best Buy interventions and policies. The 2018 WHO report *Saving lives, spending less* showed that countries and donors could save millions of lives lost to NCDs through cost-effective interventions. For each dollar invested in these interventions, a return of up to US\$ 7 could be generated through reduced health costs and improved productivity.

The updated figures in this new edition show that with the right strategic investments, countries that bear a significant amount of the NCD burden can change their disease trajectory and deliver significant health and economic gains for their citizens. Donors may also find this publication useful, following the example of Norway, which used the 2018 publication to guide its investments in global health.

WHO's target is to see one billion more people enjoying better health and well-being by 2023. As part of that commitment, we stand ready to support governments in using these Best Buy policies to protect people from NCDs. Working together, we can do this in a way that minimizes costs while maximizing health and economic benefits for countries.

In a world filled with uncertainty, one thing we can be certain of is that without action, NCDs will continue to be a significant threat to global health. Investing in evidence-based policies is an investment in a healthy future.

## INTRODUCTION

# The urgent challenge for health in the 21st century



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**Investing in the fight against noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) has never been more important. These diseases currently cause seven out of every ten deaths around the world. Yet many of the deaths could be prevented with an additional investment of less than one dollar per person per year.**

Since the beginning of 2020, much of the world's attention has been focused on COVID-19 and the immense health and economic damage done by this new disease. But COVID-19 is not the only health crisis facing the world today – far from it. Long before the pandemic began, NCDs were already responsible for the majority of global deaths. They continue to be leading threats to health in all countries and have also contributed substantially to deaths and serious illness from COVID-19.

NCDs such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, chronic respiratory diseases and stroke have a major impact on health and well-being and are responsible for around 74% of global deaths every year.<sup>1</sup> These diseases and the major risk factors that contribute to them (tobacco use, alcohol use, unhealthy diet and lack of physical activity) also have significant negative consequences on economic productivity and financial stability for individuals and households.



The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the often unseen impact of NCDs. Diabetes, heart disease and hypertension, cancer, lung diseases, and obesity all significantly worsen the effects of COVID-19, increasing the risk of serious illness or death. NCDs are also known to increase the risks from other infectious diseases, interacting in various ways and undermining people's health.

Although COVID-19 has touched both the rich and the poor, its impact on poorer people has been more severe. The poorest and most vulnerable members of society have the highest risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19 and its intersection with other health conditions, especially NCDs. This underscores the need to invest in NCD prevention and protect those whose health is most vulnerable.

In light of the pandemic, countries around the world are looking for new ways to protect people's health for the future.

Investing now to tackle NCDs would reduce the impact of these diseases and their risk factors for many years to come. As a public health investment, NCD prevention and control is a remarkable bargain, yielding a return of US\$ 7 for every dollar invested by 2030, saving millions of lives and adding millions of healthy life-years. Preventing NCDs will also help vulnerable populations better resist future pandemics by improving people's cardiovascular and overall physical health. Investing in the NCD Best Buys as part of strengthening primary health care (PHC) and including NCDs into universal health coverage (UHC) is an important part of preparedness.

There has never been a better – or more important – time to invest in NCD prevention and control. For governments, donor agencies and philanthropists, this is both an urgent challenge and an opportunity for impact. This investment case spells out the need for investment and why now, more than ever, is the time to focus on this critically underfunded area.

## WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

NCDs such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and stroke kill 41 million people annually and damage the health of millions more. These conditions often strike when people are in their most productive years, with more than 15 million people dying prematurely between the ages of 30 and 69 each year.<sup>2</sup>

Eighty-five percent of all premature deaths caused by NCDs occur in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>3</sup> On top of the human toll, this also means that these countries are the most affected by the economic losses connected to NCDs. Premature deaths take away individuals during their most productive economic years, reducing human capital and decreasing productivity while increasing costs from serious illness, disability and death.

In addition to ending lives prematurely, NCDs cause lasting social and economic harm to individuals, their families, communities and countries.

Tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diets and physical inactivity all increase the risk of becoming sick and possibly dying from an NCD.<sup>4</sup> Yet in many cases, these risk factors are driven by public policy choices that can influence the decisions that individuals make. Many of the risk factors are modifiable, meaning that action can be taken to change them. In addition, basic management of existing NCDs can prevent unnecessary deaths and improve the quality and duration of people's lives. Policies that prevent, manage, and control NCDs are therefore a robust long-term investment in improving health and well-being.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

In 2017, the World Health Assembly endorsed a package of 16 affordable, cost-effective and evidence-based NCD interventions. These are known as the NCD Best Buys. They focus on addressing the major NCD risk factors – tobacco use, harmful alcohol use, unhealthy diets and inadequate physical activity – and management of priority disease areas – cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cervical cancer.

Despite the devastating impact of NCDs and the availability of evidence-based strategies to reduce their impact, there continues to be massive underinvestment in these measures. The investment case presented here examines in more detail the costs and benefits of using the Best Buys for low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). It highlights how a relatively modest investment can help prevent NCDs and deliver significant benefits.



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# The 16 NCD Best Buy Interventions

## TOBACCO



- 1 Increase excise taxes and prices on tobacco products
- 2 Implement plain/standardized packaging and/or large graphic health warnings on all tobacco packages
- 3 Enact and enforce comprehensive bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship
- 4 Eliminate exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke in all indoor workplaces, public places and public transport
- 5 Implement effective mass-media campaigns that educate the public about the harms of smoking/tobacco use and second-hand smoke

## ALCOHOL



- 6 Increase excise taxes on alcoholic beverages
- 7 Enact and enforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on exposure to alcohol advertising (across multiple types of media)
- 8 Enact and enforce restrictions on the physical availability of alcohol in sales outlets (via reduced hours of sale)

## HEALTHY DIETS



- 9 Reduce salt intake through the reformulation of food products to contain less salt, and the setting of maximum permitted levels for the amount of salt in food
- 10 Reduce salt intake through establishing a supportive environment in public institutions such as hospitals, schools, workplaces and nursing homes, to enable low-salt options to be provided
- 11 Reduce salt intake through behavior change communication and mass-media campaigns
- 12 Reduce salt intake through the implementation of front-of-pack labelling

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



- 13 Implement community-wide public education and awareness campaigns for physical activity, including mass-media campaigns combined with other community-based education, motivational and environmental programmes aimed at supporting behavioral change around physical-activity levels

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