



REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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**PREVENTION AND CARE OF GENETIC AND CONGENITAL DISORDERS,
INCLUDING PRECONCEPTION CARE**

Objectives of the event

The objectives of the event are to:

- highlight regional progress in the promotion of preconception care;
- address ways and means to strengthen the commitment of countries to adopt preconception care interventions within national reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health programmes, in line with the United Nations *Global strategy on women's, children's and adolescent health 2016–2030* and the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- discuss development of collaborative mechanisms to support countries to scale up preconception care-related activities.

Background

Preconception care is the provision of biomedical, behavioural and social health interventions to women and couples before conception occurs. Preconception care contributes to reducing maternal and childhood mortality and improving maternal and child health outcomes through prevention and management of unhealthy behaviours, genetic disorders and risky environmental exposure. It also contributes to improving the health and well-being of women through addressing nutrition, infertility and subfertility, mental health, intimate partner and sexual violence, and substance use.

In the long term, preconception care contributes to improving the health of babies and children as they grow into adolescence and adulthood, and it contributes to the social and economic development of families and communities by supporting women to make well informed and well considered decisions about their fertility and their health.

Despite growing evidence that preconception care can improve the well-being of women and children, there is a gap in focusing on continuum of care during the pre-pregnancy period. In the Region, the prevalence of hereditary diseases and congenital malformations varies from 2% to 5% of all live births. Main congenital disorders are attributed to high rates of consanguineous

marriage and young and advanced maternal age during childbearing years. However, there is increasing awareness that gaps exist in the continuum of care and a growing body of evidence shows that preconception care can increase women's and couples' well-being and improve subsequent pregnancy and child health outcomes in line with the global strategy and SDGs.

In the Region, high- and middle-income countries have actively initiated preconception care-related interventions. Most of these countries support preconception care through the provision of health education and pre-marriage medical examination and counselling. However, there is a need to develop comprehensive national preconception care plans of action that adopt a life-course approach, are aligned with existing national health policies and meet with prevailing cultural norms and values. Adopted interventions should also be integrated into existing maternal, child and adolescent health services.

In 2015, a meeting held with Member States, with support from the United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF and international and regional experts, resulted in consensus on a set of core interventions, a regional operational framework and service delivery channels for preconception care. A regional package of evidence-based interventions and programmatic steps for promoting preconception care within countries has been developed. The package of preconception care is currently being integrated into a broader package that covers care during pregnancy and after birth with special focus on the prevention and care of common congenital disorders.

Challenges in the Region

Challenges to preconception care in the Region include:

- uneven implementation of preconception care interventions;
- lack of epidemiological data on genetic and congenital disorders in most countries;
- the need to strengthen health systems and reinforce mechanisms for collaboration and coordination, both internally and externally with key stakeholders, to ensure universal access to preconception care;
- limitations in scaling up preconception care as a result of political instability and insecurity, particularly in countries facing emergencies.

Expected outcomes

- Commitment of countries to promote preconception care as an essential component in the continuum of care.
- Agreement to integrate a preconception care component within strategic planning for national reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health programmes.
- Recognition of universal health coverage as the means to comprehensively deliver evidence-based and cost-effective preconception care interventions within the continuum of care.
- Agreement on adoption of key preconception care interventions in order to prevent stillbirths, prenatal and neonatal mortality and morbidity, as well as improve child and maternal health outcomes.