

# Message of Dr Ala Alwan

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on the Occasion of

## World Health Day

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WORLD HEALTH DAY 2013

Control your blood pressure... Control your life



Today we are observing World Health Day. Every year WHO uses this occasion to highlight an important health issue. This year the theme of World Health Day is high blood pressure, or hypertension.

High blood pressure is a major health issue which affects the lives of nearly 40% of adults over the age of 25 years, around the world, including in this region. It is known as a “silent killer” because in many cases it is detected too late to avoid complications. If not detected early and controlled, high blood pressure leads to stroke, heart disease, heart and kidney failure and blindness.

High blood pressure causes around 8 million deaths in the world every year, which is about 13% of all deaths. Around 50% of all global deaths from stroke and heart disease are attributed to high blood pressure.

Our message to you on World Health Day is “Control your blood pressure ... Control your life”. You can prevent high blood pressure and you can get it treated. How do you prevent it?

Among the major factors that cause high blood pressure are unhealthy diet, excessive use of salt, being overweight and being physically inactive. In our region, with a population of 600 million people, the rates of physical inactivity are higher than in any other region in the world. Overall, more than a third of men and nearly half of women in the Region are physically inactive.

Around 50% of adults in our region are overweight and in some countries more than 70% of women and an increasing number of children are overweight.

High blood pressure and tobacco use is a lethal combination since they both cause cardiovascular disease. In some countries of the Region more than 50% of men use tobacco.

So what should we do?



We need to change our lifestyles. This means eating a healthy balanced diet rich in vegetables and fruit. It means reducing the amount of salt we eat and avoiding food rich in fat and sugars. And it means maintaining normal body weight and taking regular exercise. Just 30 minutes a day of moderate physical activity will reduce blood pressure and help prevent heart disease, diabetes and even some cancers, such as breast and colon cancer. It also lowers the risk of stroke and depression. Many countries have managed to reduce the prevalence of high blood pressure by encouraging and promoting lifestyle changes, driving down the number of deaths from heart disease. We in this Region should do the same.

I call upon communities and individuals to rise to the challenge and take action against this “silent killer”. Simple, practical and cost-effective steps can save you, and millions like you, from falling victim to this health problem: healthy diet, weight reduction, reduction in salt intake, increased physical activity, and stopping smoking.

Of course, we know that asking people to change their lifestyles is not enough. It needs to be backed up by action at other levels also. For this reason, we call upon governments, policy-makers, the regional and international community and other stakeholders, including the food industry, to take concrete action to create an environment that is conducive to healthier living. Improving the availability of healthy foods, reducing salt in processed and manufactured foods, correct labelling of food products and providing accessible facilities for exercise are all important to creating such an environment. All sectors of government and the private sector have to be involved in this effort, not just the Ministry of Health.

As I have already mentioned, a large proportion of our population already has high blood pressure. Many people, in some countries more than 50%, do not know they have high blood pressure, and so it is not controlled and they are at high risk of developing heart attacks, strokes and kidney damage.

What can we do to help them?

As individuals we need to know whether we have high blood pressure and as health care providers we need to provide adequate services to ensure early detection and appropriate treatment of hypertension, especially among those at high risk, like overweight people and smokers. Affordable and effective medicines are available to control blood pressure and help people to lead a normal and productive life.

We need to ensure that early detection and management of hypertension are integrated in national policies, programmes and activities and are available through primary health care.

So, let us all take action to reduce our risks, control our blood pressure, and control our lives.

Not in the future, not tomorrow, but now.

I wish you a healthy “World Health Day”.

