

Curtailing Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) in Pakistan: A Step Towards Healthy Life

Ibrar Rafique, Muhammad Ayaz Mustufa
Pakistan Health Research Council, Islamabad.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are non-transmissible and generally chronic diseases and of longer duration. The factors responsible for NCDs are behavioral, physiological, genetic and environmental. The major types of NCDs are diabetes, cardiovascular diseases (stroke and heart attacks), cancers, chronic respiratory problems and neurological/mental health diseases. The risk factors for NCDs are behavioral (tobacco use, excess intake of salt and physical inactivity) and metabolic (overweight, obesity, raised blood pressure and high blood glucose level).¹

The NCDs annually kill 41 million individuals which is equal to 71% of all the deaths. Globally 15 million people lost their lives in the age of 30-69 years due to NCDs and 85% of these deaths were in low and middle income countries. In South East Asia, 55% deaths are due to NCDs contributing as a major cause of disease burden and mortality.² The mental health problems/neurological disorders accounts for 10.2% of the global Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs).³

The NCD risk factors survey among adults from two big provinces of Pakistan showed that use of tobacco was 19.7%, overweight 26.3%, obesity 14.9%, stage-I hypertension 37% and stage II hypertension was 15.9%.⁴ The survey also showed that low level of physical activity was in 41.5% population and about 96.5% were not taking healthy diet as per WHO recommendations. The 2nd national survey on diabetes showed that 1 in every fourth Pakistani is diabetic.⁵ The survey on pediatric NCDs from one of the larger provinces (Sindh) from Pakistan revealed high prevalence of risk factors which ultimately end up in non-communicable diseases in adult life.⁶

Corresponding Author:

Ibrar Rafique
Pakistan Health Research Council
Islamabad.
Email: ibrarpmrc@gmail.com

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A comprehensive model proposed by the American Heart Association on healthy life style interventions depicts inter-connectivity between government organizations, education system, health fitness industry, insurance industry, mobile health technology, media and employers.⁷ The Mexico has developed and implemented Casalud Model for control and prevention of NCDs. It has five pillars including prevention and detection of chronic diseases, their management, continuous supply of medications, capacity building of health care personnel's followed by patient engagement. The model was reviewed for effectiveness and found that political support, adaptable to latest technical improvement, alignment with health trends and capacity building are the enablers for this system.⁸ A systematic review on different approaches for controlling NCDs revealed that, for less developed countries, passive case finding approaches should be used along with counseling of patients on diet and lifestyle and uniform pattern for diagnostics and treatment.⁹

Based on above statistics, there is a need for multi- sectoral approach by involving all the stakeholders for tackling NCDs. The capacity in terms of research and surveillance should be strengthened. The findings emerged from the research on NCDs needs to be translated into the health policy. The Government must focus on providing quality care at primary health care unit for NCDs with special emphasis on preventive strategies.

As there are behavioral factors involved in the NCDs, therefore it is suggested that interventions must be promoted in schools related to healthy dietary habits and physical activity. Open places and parks may be renovated or reconstructed to make them attractive for the masses which will encourage people for their healthy activities and exercises. Awareness campaigns among school going children and young adults can also yield good results. People should be encouraging to take healthier diet by increasing the consumption of vegetable and fruits. The

consumption of greasy diet and fizzy drinks should be decreased by imposing ban on sale of these items in at least one kilometer radius of all teaching centers/ institutes and schools. Advertisement of the fast food and unhealthy foods and drinks should be ban on all media channels. Heavy taxes and duties should be imposed to discourage and decrease the sales of unhealthy food and drinks especially on cigarettes. It is very important to take all stakeholders including religious leaders and political leaders on board for creating awareness/ educational drive against NCDs.

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