

Responding to the Challenge of Non-communicable Diseases

United Nations Population Fund

1. There are strong links between protecting and promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and preventing and controlling non-communicable diseases

NCDs have a significant impact on the sexual and reproductive health of both men and women.

- Obesity, hypertension and diabetes during pregnancy lead to poorer maternal and neonatal outcomes.
- Tobacco use, by both pregnant women and other family members, adversely affects the foetus, newborn and children, as does maternal alcohol consumption.
- Lack of breastfeeding increases the risk of NCDs in later life.
- Poor diet, tobacco, alcohol and exposure to chemicals also affect fertility, reducing sperm viability and increasing erectile dysfunction in men.
- Harmful use of alcohol increases the risk of unprotected sex, unintended pregnancies, HIV and other STIs including human papilloma virus (HPV), as well as the risk of domestic and gender-based violence.

United Nations high-level meetings have highlighted the need for UN agencies, including UNFPA, to scale up their work on NCDs as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹

NCDs contribute to ill health, poverty and inequities and slow the development of countries. Every year 15 million people die before age 70 from NCDs, with 86% of these premature deaths occurring in developing countries.

Major progress on NCDs is possible. Premature deaths from NCDs are largely caused by modifiable behavioural risk factors, such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol. Environmental risks (e.g. air pollution) and constrained access to basic services also contribute significantly to NCDs.

Addressing NCDs requires coordinated action from all UN agencies within a broader whole-of-society response.

Premature deaths from NCDs are largely preventable by encouraging women, men and young people to reduce their use of tobacco and consumption of harmful amounts of alcohol, adopt a healthy diet and step up their levels of physical activity.

Cervical cancer is a global public health issue and can largely be prevented by vaccinating 9 to 13-year-old girls and boys against HPV. Penile and oropharyngeal cancers can also be prevented through HPV vaccination.

Mental health is now an integral part of the NCD agenda and post-natal depression is considered a major public health issue.

¹ Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (2011); Political Declaration of the Third High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable diseases (2018); E/RES/2018/13 United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases.

2. UNFPA has a role to play in supporting countries to prevent and control NCDs in line with UNFPA's commitment to improve public health throughout the lifecycle.

NCDs are an increasing priority for UNFPA. By expanding its activities to include the prevention and control of NCDs, UNFPA will have a significant impact on reducing the current and future NCD burden. By tackling NCDs, UNFPA contributes to a direct improvement in maternal and neonatal health outcomes.

UNFPA can support sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) policy-makers and service providers to help young people and women of childbearing age reduce their exposure to, and use of tobacco and alcohol, and promote healthy diets and physical activity. Ante- and postnatal care also provide significant opportunities for the detection, prevention and management of diabetes and high blood pressure in women.

UNFPA promotes exclusive breastfeeding for at least the first six months of life. Breastfeeding has long-term benefits for mothers and children in reducing the risk of NCDs.

Several UNFPA programmes strengthen services which provide support to women with postpartum depression and other psychosocial conditions that impact them and their families.

UNFPA is making a significant contribution to the elimination of cervical cancer globally by supporting countries in their efforts to scale up HPV vaccination, as well as through cervical cancer screening and early diagnosis activities as part of comprehensive cervical cancer control programmes.

UNFPA works with men and boys to reduce gender-based violence: this includes reducing the exposure to, and harmful use of alcohol by men in order to lessen alcohol-related violence.

UNFPA is also committed to raising awareness about the socioeconomic impact of an ageing population, including the impact of NCDs in this group. In relation to this activity, UNFPA supports national censuses and demographic health surveys in order to improve population projections and strengthen policy and planning, including NCD programming.

UNFPA has reviewed the cost-effective interventions endorsed by the World Health Assembly in order to identify those that are linked to UNFPA's work at global, regional and country level: specific examples are given in the table.

BEST BUYS

In 2017, the World Health Assembly endorsed a set of "best buys" and other recommended interventions to address NCDs.² Best buy interventions address four NCD risk factors (tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity) and four disease areas (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory disease). There are 88 recommended interventions, including overarching/enabling policy actions.



² WHO. 2017. 'Best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. Available at: <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259232/WHO-NMH-NVI-17.9-eng.pdf>.

Evidence-based interventions	UNFPA actions
Promote and support exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life.	Exclusive breastfeeding is promoted by midwives as part of their comprehensive antenatal and postnatal care interventions and services.
Preconception care among women of reproductive age who have impaired glucose tolerance or diabetes, including patient education and intensive glucose management.	Midwives and other antenatal care providers include diabetic screening and management, specifically for expectant women in antenatal clinic settings, and via outreach services where possible.
Human papillomavirus vaccination (2 doses) for 9 to 13-year-old girls and boys.	UNFPA supports delivery of HPV vaccination through primary health care services and school vaccination programmes.
Prevention of cervical cancer by screening women aged 30–49 years.	UNFPA is assisting countries to strengthen cervical cancer screening and referral for treatment from family planning, HIV and primary health care services.
Screening with mammography (once every two years for women aged 50–69 years) linked with timely diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.	Breast cancer screening services are being supported by a limited number of UNFPA country offices.
Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).	Governments are supported in implementing “in and out-of-school” CSE programmes: these promote healthy behaviour patterns, reduce NCD risk factors and endeavour to lessen unprotected sex in order to lower the incidence of unplanned pregnancies and STIs including HPV.
Promote tobacco avoidance and cessation in young people.	Through adolescent CSE and SRH services, youth community centres and peer outreach programmes, young people are supported in making healthier life choices that reduce their exposure to NCD risk factors.
Implement nutrition education and counselling in order to increase the intake of fruit and vegetables and reduce salt intake.	
Promote physical activity.	

3. Partnerships with UN and other development agencies are critical for UNFPA in mobilizing an effective response to NCDs

UNFPA is a member of the UN Joint Global Programme on Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control, which assists countries to reduce the burden of cervical cancer via the WHO-led Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative.

UNFPA is an adviser to GAVI and a number of countries in rolling out HPV vaccination as part of adolescent health, screening and treatment programmes.

At the regional level, UNFPA is working to strengthen the capacity of service providers, especially in delivering cervical cancer screening and treatment programmes. For example, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNFPA has developed a training programme for health care providers in cervical cancer screening and treatment.

UNFPA is supporting the rolling out of HPV vaccination in the Arab States and is currently contributing to regional training programmes, as well as to assessments of NCD prevention and control needs, including opportunities for scaling up the “best buys”.

UNFPA country programmes provide backing for the strengthening of safe motherhood programmes in all countries, as well as for developing partnerships with youth and women’s organizations to include activities in favour of NCD prevention.

Due diligence is required to ensure all partnerships advance health and development outcomes. Some private sector activities are beneficial for public health, while others contribute to NCD burdens by working to increase or preserve the availability, accessibility and/or desirability of health-harming products. An example is the fundamental conflict of interest between the tobacco industry and public health. Partnerships with some pharmaceutical companies may pose apparent or real conflicts of interest.

4. Mobilizing resources to deliver

While UNFPA's focus is on improving sexual and reproductive health and rights, it is increasingly looking to identify opportunities to mobilize resources for incorporating NCD prevention and control into its programmes, in the expectation that these efforts will have a direct impact on improving sexual and reproductive health for all.



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The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases was established in 2013 by the Secretary General and placed under the leadership of WHO to coordinate the activities of the UN System to support the realization of the commitments made by Heads of State and Government in the 2011 Political Declaration on NCDs. Joint activities included in the work plan of the Task Force are additive to various, more comprehensive efforts conducted by the UN agencies to prevent and control NCDs. These joint activities offer important opportunities to address cross-cutting issues and to advance capacity and learning in countries.



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