

A holistic approach to combat chronic diseases in India

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Chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes and obesity are rapidly rising in India. The good news is that more than half of these are preventable through lifestyle changes, by individuals in the population. This is despite the evidence that Indians may be genetically predisposed to many of these diseases.

For the best health results, individuals must eat healthy foods, consume optimal calories, and reduce their intake of salt, sugar and refined foods. They must eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, pulses, nuts and seeds, quit smoking and chewing tobacco, exercise, move more and breathe healthy air.

This said, scientific studies have shown that there are larger systems at play, which determine people's diets and lifestyles and slowly lead to individuals developing chronic diseases. These systems must be addressed before we make meaningful progress in preventing chronic diseases and moving towards a healthier India.

The role of supportive environments in addressing chronic diseases

Why do we explore the best options for our children, when it comes to schools and colleges? The reason is that the teachers and the entire ecosystem provide a supportive environment for the child's greater academic and non-academic achievements, leading to a better and brighter future.

Similarly, to promote excellent health, and to prevent chronic diseases in populations, we need to create structured ecosystems which encourage each individual to eat healthy food and incorporate more movement in their daily lives, throughout the day. Needless to say, this applies to individuals across all age groups.

The role of these systems in creating the right environment for healthier individuals, families, and communities is now recognised by the scientific community worldwide, as the best science to prevent chronic diseases in populations.

Key ecosystems that create good health and prevent chronic diseases

To build awareness and create a culture shift from unhealthy practices to healthy ones, we must change present-day social norms. The important areas of change include the following:

Healthy eating: Healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables in their raw forms, nuts, seeds, pulses, whole grains and healthy oils must be made cheaper and more easily available and accessible. In addition, cooked, healthy foods should be available across access points such as public transport, at the workplace and in educational institutes.

Empowering healthier choices: Large portions of unhealthy foods and beverages are known promoters of chronic diseases. These, along with freebies, need to be de-incentivised and smaller portion sizes need to be promoted. Children must be protected from the onslaught of unhealthy product advertising. Many countries have already implemented this by banning advertising of products and services which target children directly or indirectly.

Decreasing salt and sugar in processed food is also critical in chronic disease prevention. All processed and packaged foods and beverages must be made to display traffic colour labels which are easy to interpret irrespective of educational status, language and technical capabilities. Additionally, the text on the label should be legible and must display all the mandatory information.

Regulations like eliminating trans fats in foods and awareness campaigns discouraging tobacco use further support a healthy life.

Supportive agriculture: Practices and policies that boost the production and accessibility of healthy foods, such as higher taxation on junk food, processed foods and unhealthy beverages to subsidise grants to farmers who grow healthy foods; programs that help farmers connect

with reliable markets for selling their healthy produce will make healthy foods a more viable choice for the consumer as well as the producer.

Encouraging movement through better town planning: Scientific research shows that planting trees along streets and in urban areas has a significant impact. Large green parks and urban green forests within a 0.5 km radius is known to improve the life of communities around them. Lush greenery can bring down surface temperatures by 15-20 degrees Celsius and ambient temperatures by 5-6 degrees, making walking and cycling more comfortable, especially in hot climates. Trees also act as natural filters, reducing air pollution and creating a healthier environment.

Prioritising safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and everyone using the roads is fundamental. This principle should be embedded in every step of layout planning, from initial design to construction. Proven strategies exist to achieve this. For instance, calming traffic by narrowing car lanes encourages slower driving and reduces the risk of accidents. Additionally, wider sidewalks provide ample space for pedestrians, making movement more comfortable.

Keeping residents away from high-traffic crossings and highways is also critical to reducing health issues triggered by high noise and air pollution. Having systems to prevent air pollution should be a top priority with live, actionable dashboards in the city administration's control.

Prioritising public transport: Investing in reliable and efficient public transport systems gives people a convenient alternative to cars. This not only reduces traffic congestion but also encourages physical activity through walking and waiting for buses or trains.

Individual choices are important. However, leaving it all to the individual is not a holistic way of addressing the challenge. More important is creating an environment that is conducive to good health in every way. This leads to healthy systems, healthy societies, happy people and happy societies