



The Global Rise of Non-Communicable Diseases: Drivers, Trends, and Implications for Healthcare Systems

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Abstract

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are now the leading cause of death globally, posing a significant challenge to healthcare systems worldwide. This review examines the multifaceted drivers of this rise, including demographic transitions, globalization-driven dietary shifts, environmental factors, and social determinants of health. Trends in NCD prevalence reveal an increasing incidence and a shifting burden, particularly impacting low- and middle-income countries. This “double burden” of disease necessitates comprehensive approaches to address both communicable and non-communicable conditions. The implications for healthcare systems are substantial, with increased healthcare costs, strained resources, and a need for innovative strategies for prevention, early detection, and long-term management. The review concludes by emphasizing the importance of addressing social determinants of health, promoting healthy lifestyles, and investing in stronger healthcare systems to mitigate the growing burden of NCDs and ensure a healthier future for all.

Keywords: Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), Global health, Health disparities, Social determinants of health, Healthcare systems, Prevention, Health policy

1 Introduction

The global health landscape is shifting dramatically, with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) now emerging as the dominant public health threat. While infectious diseases remain a significant concern, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, the global burden of chronic conditions like heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases is steadily increasing. This rise in NCDs presents a complex challenge, demanding a comprehensive response from healthcare systems, policymakers, and individuals alike.

The implications of this growing burden are far-reaching. NCDs impact individual lives, strain healthcare resources, inflate healthcare expenditures, and hinder economic development. Understanding the multifaceted drivers of this global epidemic, analyzing key trends, and exploring the implications for healthcare systems is crucial for formulating effective strategies to address this pressing public health challenge (1).

This review will delve into the key factors contributing to the global rise of NCDs, exploring demographic transitions, globalization-induced dietary shifts, environmental factors, and the critical role of social determinants of health. We will analyze emerging trends in NCD prevalence, highlighting the shifting burden and the “double burden” of disease many countries face. Finally, we will examine the implications of this epidemic for healthcare systems, emphasizing the need for innovative approaches to prevention, early detection, and long-term management. By shedding light on these complex factors, we aim to contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges posed by NCDs and to inform the development of effective solutions for a healthier future.

2 Drivers of the NCD Epidemic

The global rise of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is driven by a complex interplay of factors, encompassing demographic shifts, globalization-induced dietary changes, environmental influences, and the pervasive impact of social determinants of health. Understanding these drivers is essential for formulating effective prevention and management strategies. The world’s population is aging, with a growing proportion of individuals over 60 years old. This demographic shift is a key driver of NCD prevalence, as many chronic conditions become more common with advancing age. For instance, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes are strongly associated with aging. As populations age, the demand for healthcare services and resources to manage these conditions will inevitably increase (2).

This demographic shift is particularly pronounced in high-income countries, where life expectancy is longer and birth rates are lower. However, the aging of populations is also a significant trend in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. The increasing number of older adults in these regions places a strain on healthcare systems that are often already struggling to cope with the burden of infectious diseases and poverty. Globalization has led to increased access to processed foods, high-fat diets, and sugary beverages. This shift in dietary patterns, often accompanied by reduced physical activity and sedentary lifestyles, has contributed significantly to the rise of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. The ready availability of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods, coupled with marketing strategies that target vulnerable populations, has created an environment that promotes unhealthy eating habits (3).

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The rapid expansion of fast-food chains and supermarkets stocking processed foods has made unhealthy food options readily accessible and affordable, particularly in low- and middle-income countries undergoing rapid urbanization. The rise of sedentary lifestyles, driven by increased reliance on cars and technology, further exacerbates these dietary trends (4).

The marketing and promotion of unhealthy foods, often targeted toward children and young adults, play a significant role in shaping dietary choices. These marketing campaigns often use persuasive techniques and target vulnerable groups with limited access to healthy options. Furthermore, the affordability and accessibility of processed foods make them attractive choices for low-income families, particularly in areas where healthy food options may be scarce (5).

Exposure to environmental toxins, such as air pollution, tobacco smoke, and hazardous chemicals, can significantly increase the risk of developing NCDs. Air pollution, for example, has been linked to cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and respiratory illnesses. Tobacco smoke remains a leading cause of preventable deaths from cancer, heart disease, and lung diseases. The cumulative impact of environmental exposures can contribute to the development of chronic conditions, particularly in vulnerable populations with limited access to clean air, water, and safe environments (6).

The increasing use of fossil fuels, industrialization, and deforestation contribute to the rise in air pollution levels. Exposure to fine particulate matter, ozone, and other pollutants can have detrimental effects on cardiovascular and respiratory health. Furthermore, climate change is expected to exacerbate environmental risks, leading to increased heat waves, droughts, and other extreme weather events that can impact human health (7).

The social determinants of health, including poverty, lack of access to healthcare, education, and healthy food options, and social isolation, play a critical role in shaping NCD risk.

Individuals living in poverty often experience limited access to nutritious foods, safe environments, and healthcare services, making them more vulnerable to developing NCDs (8).

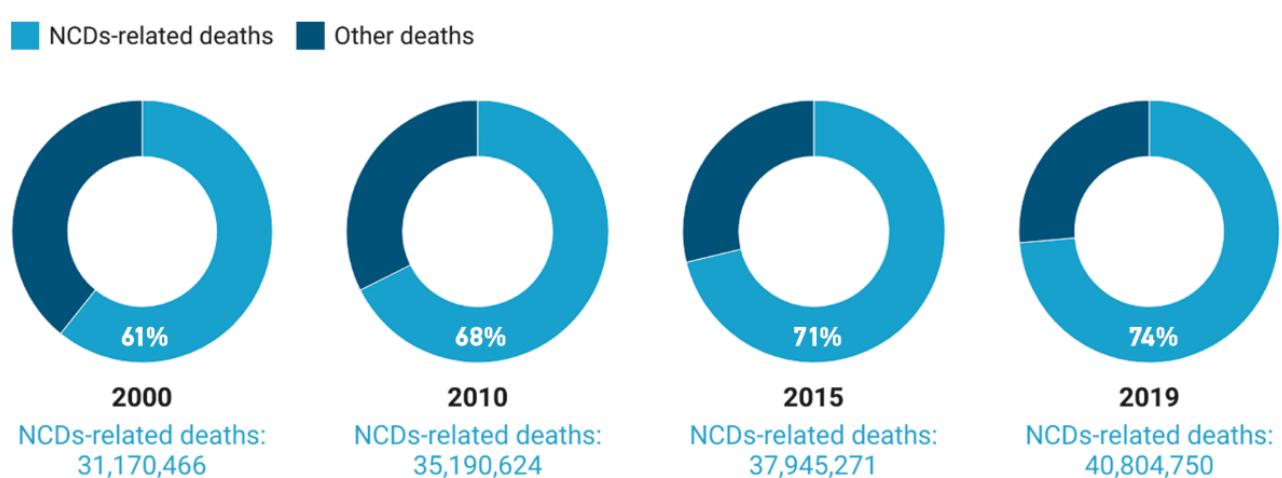
Disparities in education, employment, and social support systems can further exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Addressing the social determinants of health is essential for achieving health equity and reducing the burden of NCDs, particularly in disadvantaged populations (9). Social determinants of health create significant disparities in NCD risk and outcomes. For example, individuals living in poverty often face limited access to healthy food options, as affordable and nutritious food may be scarce in their communities. They may also have less access to safe environments for physical activity and face greater exposure to environmental hazards. Furthermore, lack of access to healthcare can lead to delayed diagnosis and management of NCDs, leading to worse health outcomes.

3 Trends in NCD Prevalence

The rising tide of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), a group encompassing chronic conditions like heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases, poses a growing global health threat. Their prevalence is steadily rising, transforming healthcare landscapes and placing significant strain on public health systems worldwide. The global burden of NCDs has been steadily rising for decades, but the past few years have witnessed a particularly alarming increase. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), NCDs account for 71% of all deaths globally, with over 41 million deaths annually attributed to these conditions. This prevalence extends across all age groups, socioeconomic strata, and geographic regions, highlighting the global nature of the NCD epidemic (10).

Deaths from non-communicable diseases since 2000

Each year, an average of 36.2 million people die of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), equivalent to 68 percent of global deaths.



Source: WHO Global Health Estimates

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Figure 1: Deaths from non-communicable diseases

The rise in NCD prevalence is a complex interplay of various factors, including aging populations, coupled with increasing life expectancies, contributing significantly to the growing number of individuals susceptible to NCDs. Sedentary lifestyles, unhealthy diets, and widespread tobacco use are key contributors to the development of NCDs. These lifestyle choices are often influenced by urbanization, globalization, and rapid economic development. Exposure to environmental pollutants, inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, and climate change can also play a role in NCD development. While lifestyle and environmental factors play a major role, genetic predisposition can also increase susceptibility to certain NCDs (2). Limited access to affordable healthcare, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, can lead to delayed diagnosis and treatment, exacerbating the burden of NCDs. The rising prevalence of NCDs has several far-reaching consequences, including increased healthcare costs, reduced productivity, social inequality, and strain on public health resources. The treatment and management of NCDs place significant financial strain on individuals, families, and national healthcare systems. The disability and premature mortality associated with NCDs negatively impact workforce participation and economic development. NCDs disproportionately affect low-income populations, further exacerbating existing social inequalities. The growing demand for NCD prevention and treatment programs challenges public health resources and necessitates innovative approaches to disease management (11).

Addressing the NCD crisis requires a multi-faceted approach encompassing implementing robust public health programs aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles, encouraging physical activity, and reducing tobacco use. Enhancing access to early diagnosis and screening services to ensure timely intervention and treatment is crucial. Investing in strengthening healthcare systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, to ensure equitable access to quality care is also vital. Supporting ongoing research to develop new and effective treatments, preventive strategies, and diagnostics is essential. Fostering international collaboration and knowledge sharing to promote effective NCD prevention and management initiatives worldwide is key (12). The rising prevalence of NCDs poses a formidable challenge to global health. Tackling this crisis requires a multi-sectoral approach that combines public health interventions, policy changes, and individual behavior modification. By taking decisive action now, we can mitigate the devastating impact of NCDs and create a healthier future for all.

4 Implications for Healthcare Systems

The global surge in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is not just a health crisis; it's a stark reality that is reshaping the very fabric of healthcare systems worldwide. The implications are profound, forcing healthcare providers, policymakers, and researchers to adapt and innovate to meet the growing demands of chronic disease management. NCDs are, by their nature, chronic conditions requiring long-term management, which translates to a significant strain on healthcare resources. The demand for specialized care, medications, and ongoing monitoring far surpasses the resources available in many healthcare systems. This disparity in resources creates a vicious cycle, leading to longer wait times, overburdened healthcare professionals, and ultimately, poorer health outcomes for patients. The increasing prevalence of NCDs necessitates a fundamental shift in healthcare priorities. Traditional focus on acute illnesses and infectious diseases needs to be balanced with a greater emphasis on prevention, early detection, and management of chronic conditions. This requires investment in

primary care, community health programs, and public health initiatives that address the modifiable risk factors for NCDs like unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and tobacco use (13).

The sheer volume of NCD patients demands innovative solutions to optimize care delivery. Technological advancements, such as telehealth, telemonitoring, and mobile health applications, have the potential to improve patient access, enhance disease management, and reduce the burden on traditional healthcare settings. This necessitates a significant investment in digital infrastructure and healthcare technologies. The rising costs associated with NCD management pose a significant threat to the financial sustainability of healthcare systems (14). Without proactive measures, healthcare budgets will be increasingly consumed by NCD care, leaving fewer resources for other essential health services. This requires exploring alternative financing models, promoting cost-effective treatments, and encouraging greater individual responsibility for health.

Addressing the NCD crisis effectively requires collaboration between public and private stakeholders. Governments need to invest in strengthening public health infrastructure, while the private sector can contribute through innovation, research, and development of new treatments and technologies (15). This collaborative approach is essential for creating a sustainable and responsive healthcare system capable of managing the NCD burden effectively. The implications of rising NCDs for healthcare systems are undeniably significant. Adapting to this new reality requires a multi-pronged approach encompassing resource allocation, policy changes, technological advancements, and collaborative efforts between public and private sectors. Only through concerted action can we build a healthcare system that is prepared to meet the challenges of chronic disease management and ensure better health outcomes for generations to come.

5 Conclusion

The global rise of non-communicable diseases presents a significant challenge for public health. Understanding the complex drivers, trends, and implications of this epidemic is crucial for developing effective strategies for prevention, early detection, and management. These strategies must address not only individual behaviors but also broader societal factors that contribute to NCD risk. Investing in strengthening healthcare systems, promoting healthy lifestyles, and addressing social determinants of health are essential steps towards mitigating the burden of NCDs and ensuring a healthier future for all.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Gaukhar B. Kumar; methodology, Anara Abitova; formal analysis, Zhuldyz K. Tashimova; investigation, Gaukhar B. Kumar; resources, Anara Abitova; writing—original draft preparation, Zhuldyz K. Tashimova, Anara Abitova; writing—review and editing, Zhuldyz K. Tashimova, Gaukhar B. Kumar, Zhuldyz K. Tashimova.

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Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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