

1. Non-Communicable Diseases

According to the latest Global Burden of Disease (GBD) report published in The Lancet, Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) now account for nearly two-thirds of global deaths. And, from 1990 to 2023, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have increasingly become the dominant causes of death in India, overtaking infectious diseases.

Meaning and Nature of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

Definition – Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), also known as chronic diseases, are medical conditions that are not caused by infectious agents and generally progress slowly but last for long durations.

Key Characteristics – They are typically of long duration, have slow progression, and require continuous medical attention rather than one-time treatment.

Main Types –

Cardiovascular diseases – Heart attacks, stroke, hypertension.

Cancers – Various malignancies caused by genetic, lifestyle, or environmental factors.

Chronic respiratory diseases – Asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Diabetes mellitus – Caused by insulin resistance or deficiency.

Other emerging NCDs – Mental health disorders, chronic kidney disease, and neurodegenerative diseases (e.g., Alzheimer's).

Causes and Determinants of NCDs

Genetic Factors – Family history of hypertension, diabetes, or cancer increases risk.

Physiological Factors – High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity are key physiological triggers.

Behavioural and Lifestyle Factors –

1. Unhealthy diet (high salt, sugar, and fat intake).
2. Physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyle.
3. Tobacco and alcohol consumption.
4. Increased screen time and sleep deprivation.

Environmental Determinants –

1. Rising air pollution leading to respiratory and cardiac disorders.
2. Exposure to hazardous chemicals and occupational pollutants.
3. Urban heat islands exacerbating stress and cardiovascular strain.

Socioeconomic Factors –

1. Rising incomes and urbanisation alter diet and activity patterns ("nutrition transition").
2. Lifestyle-driven "diseases of affluence" replace infectious diseases in developing economies.

Epidemiological and Demographic Transition

Demographic Shift – Declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy lead to an ageing population more prone to NCDs.

Epidemiological Transition – Success in controlling communicable diseases (via vaccination, sanitation) has led to a shift toward NCD dominance.

Urbanisation Impact – Modern urban lifestyles promote sedentary behaviour and processed food consumption – accelerating NCD incidence.

Implications of the NCD Burden

High Mortality – NCDs account for over 70% of global deaths; in India, they cause over 60% of all deaths. Three-quarters of global NCD deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries.

Economic Burden – WHO estimates India loses nearly \$250 billion annually in productivity due to NCDs. Out-of-pocket expenditure exceeds 50%, leading to catastrophic health spending for many families.

Healthcare System Strain – Chronic disease management demands continuous treatment, diagnostics, and specialised care. Public health infrastructure in rural areas remains underprepared for NCD management.

Social and Demographic Impact – Affects middle-aged, working-age populations, reducing productivity and threatening demographic dividend. Leads to premature deaths, disability, and dependency.

Reduced Quality of Life – Chronic pain, fatigue, disability, and psychological stress result in social isolation and reduced well-being.

Global Commitments – India's target under SDG 3.4 is to reduce premature mortality from NCDs by one-third by 2030, but current progress remains off-track.

Government Initiatives and Policy Measures

National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD) –

Implements screening, diagnosis, and treatment at district and community levels. Focuses on population-based prevention and capacity building of healthcare workers.

Ayushman Bharat – Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs) – Emphasise preventive, promotive, and community-based care. Offer NCD screening and lifestyle modification counselling.

Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) – Ensures affordable access to essential medicines for hypertension, diabetes, and cancer.

Fit India Movement (2019) – Promotes physical fitness, sports, and active lifestyles across all age groups.

Eat Right India Campaign – Led by FSSAI to encourage balanced diets, food fortification, and reduction in salt, sugar, and fat consumption.

Tobacco Control Efforts – Implementation of COTPA (Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act) and National Tobacco Control Programme. Taxation and plain packaging measures in line with WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).

Expert Views and Policy Recommendations

Expert Insight – According to Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, India's rapid health transition, combined with urbanisation and globalisation, has accelerated NCD growth. As people live longer but with higher morbidity, healthy ageing must become a policy priority.

Prevention-Oriented Strategy – Focus on reducing modifiable risk factors (tobacco, alcohol, diet, inactivity) through low-cost, community-based interventions.

Multi-Sectoral Collaboration – NCD control is not just a health issue; it requires coordination between health, education, transport, urban planning, and finance ministries. Promoting walkable cities, safe public spaces, and nutrition education in schools can yield long-term gains.

Technology and Data-Driven Approach – Strengthen digital health records, telemedicine, and AI-based disease surveillance for early detection. National NCD registries and real-time data analytics can improve policy targeting.

Community Empowerment – Involve local self-governments, NGOs, and civil society in awareness campaigns. Encourage community-based screening camps and peer-support networks for lifestyle change.

The Way Forward

Shift from Cure to Prevention – Prioritise primary prevention, health literacy, and lifestyle modification over tertiary treatment.

Strengthen Primary Health Infrastructure – Integrate NCD care into primary healthcare through universal screening.

Promote Health Equity – Address rural-urban disparities and improve access for vulnerable populations.

Invest in Research and Innovation – Develop indigenous diagnostics, affordable drugs, and data-driven predictive tools.

Periodic Monitoring – Establish clear indicators and targets to track SDG 3.4 progress and national NCD reduction outcomes.

Source – <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/study-leading-cause-of-deaths-in-india-shifts-from-infectious-to-ncds-10303357/>