

## What are NCDs

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are medical conditions which, by definition, are non-infectious and non-transmissible between persons. NCDs are usually chronic i.e. of long duration and slow progression, but they can be acute e.g. the rapid onset of strokes. The four main types, accounting for 80% of NCDs, are **cardiovascular diseases** (like heart attacks and stroke), **cancers**, **chronic respiratory diseases** (such as chronic obstructed pulmonary disease and asthma) and **diabetes**. They are characterized as “lifestyle” diseases because the majority of them can be prevented by lifestyle changes. However, NCDs also include autoimmune diseases, chronic kidney disease, osteoporosis, Alzheimer’s disease, cataracts and many more.

## The links between causes and effects

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified important risk factors for non-communicable disease. Risk factors such as a person's background; lifestyle and environment are known to increase the likelihood of certain NCDs. They include age, sex, genetics, exposure to air pollution, and behaviors. Analysis has shown that 80% of NCDs are associated with three main behavioral risk factors - substance abuse, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity. Other factors associated with higher risk of NCDs include a person's economic and social conditions – the "social determinants of health."

## Work and lifestyle

The causes of non-infectious and non-transmissible diseases are multifactorial and it is difficult to separate genetic, lifestyle, environmental and work-related factors. Developments in technology, monitoring techniques, understanding of science and cultural acceptance shift knowledge, perceptions and responsibilities. It is important for businesses to differentiate work-related ill health, for which they have legal responsibilities for prevention and often rehabilitation and compensation, from those conditions having genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors, for which businesses do not have legal or moral responsibility, or the ability to control them.

## Why NCDs are of concern to business

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) reports NCDs to be by far the leading cause of mortality in the world, representing over 60% of all deaths and this is likely to increase to over 80% by 2030; deaths caused by infectious diseases, maternal and perinatal conditions and nutritional deficiencies are expected to decline. All age groups and all global regions are affected, and women and men are affected equally. The effects of ill health associated with NCDs represent a drain on available resources. A large proportion of NCDs are preventable and they share modifiable behavioral risk factors such as substance abuse, unhealthy diet and lack of physical activity. These risk factors lead to overweight and obesity, raised blood pressure, and raised cholesterol.

If no action is taken, over the next three decades it is estimated that the cost of the NCD burden will amount to trillions of dollars of lost resources and a considerable burden to healthcare systems, society and economies. Feasible and cost-effective interventions to reduce the burden and impact of NCDs exist, and sustained action to prevent risk factors and improve health care can avert millions of preventable premature deaths globally and save millions in health and care costs.

## **NCDs are important to business because**

- Businesses need workers to be present and performing at optimum levels to contribute to sustainable enterprises, growing employment prospects and economies.
- As the four main types of NCDs are considered preventable because the risk factors are modifiable, the workplace is an important source and place of information and education.
- In many countries, the employer may be the only, or best, accessible source of healthcare information and interventions or may be the financial provider for access to the services.
- Health information provided to workers can permeate to the family and community.
- Some businesses are seen to be linked with the causes of NCDs e.g. food, drink and tobacco and need to consider this in their strategic planning. There are both business opportunities and business threats presented from issues surrounding NCDs.
- Some businesses are seen to provide the solutions to prevention or alleviation of NCDs e.g. sports activities, pharmaceuticals and healthcare. They have business opportunities from issues surrounding NCDs.
- Other business not directly identified with NCDs need to consider the secondary business threats and opportunities from policies and actions focused on NCDs.

## **NCDs - a developing policy issue**

The UN has made the reduction of NCDs a priority for coordinated UN agency action, led by the WHO, as it will help achieve many of the Millennium Development Goals, save millions of lives and enhance development initiatives. The WHO is currently developing

- a comprehensive global monitoring framework, including indicators, and a set of voluntary global targets, for the prevention and control of NCDs.
- a global action plan for the prevention and control of NCDs covering the period 2013 to 2020, building on lessons learnt from the 2008–2013 plan and consistent with existing WHO strategies and tools on tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity.

## **Partnerships for business**

NCDs are largely preventable by means of effective interventions that tackle shared risk factors, namely: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol. The WHO recognizes that it needs to involve selected parts of the private sector to achieve their objectives and are strengthening and facilitating multisectoral action for the prevention and control of NCDs. The WHO intends to do this via effective and transparent partnerships, while safeguarding public health from any potential conflict of interest. The IOE represents the broad interests of employers in the policy discussions.

If business is to be an effective partner in helping international agencies, regional, national and local actors realize the prevention of NCDs they must be involved in the policy discussions to ensure that developments align with business imperatives. Business actors must also be involved with designing and implementing any action to ensure that business initiatives and messages are consistent with those of the healthcare system within which they operate.

## **What the IOE does to influence developments**

The IOE promotes and defends the interests of business and employers in international forums and works to ensure enterprise development and job creation. IOE work on occupational and public health issues focuses on employment and social conditions for sustainable enterprises.

### **For more Information and Answers to your Questions**

Members will be kept informed of the policy developments in the debate on NCDs. For more information on this topic, please visit the Occupational Safety and Health section of our website [www.ioe-emp.org](http://www.ioe-emp.org). If you do not find what you are looking for, please email the IOE's Adviser, Dr Pierre Vincensini, at [vincensini@ioe-emp.com](mailto:vincensini@ioe-emp.com) or call: +41 22 929 00 15.