

Editorial

**THE EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR THE PREVENTION AND
CONTROL OF NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES**

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Gaining health: the European strategy for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases, debated at the 56th session of the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Committee for Europe during 11th -14th September 2006, promotes a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

Its objectives are to combine integrated action on risk factors and determinants across sectors with efforts to strengthen health systems toward improved prevention and control.

The European Region is the worst afflicted by NCDs, and their growth continues. In terms of the burden of disease, the chief contributors are cardiovascular diseases (23%), neuropsychiatric disorders (20%) and cancer (11%).

The Region's poorer countries face the double burden of rising NCDs rates, and persistent communicable diseases and inadequate health systems. People in low socioeconomic groups have twice the risk of serious illness and premature death of those in high socioeconomic groups, partly owing to poorer access to healthy food and greater tobacco and harmful alcohol consumption (1).

In the WHO European Region 86% of deaths and 77% of the burden of diseases are caused by noncommunicable diseases - a group of conditions that includes cardiovascular disease, cancer, mental health problems, diabetes mellitus, chronic respiratory disease, and musculoskeletal conditions. According to WHO statistics, the leading NCDs in the Region in 2002 in terms of mortality were cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory, digestive and neuropsychiatric disorders. This broad group of disorders are largely preventable and are linked by common risk factors, underlying determinants for which intervention should be performed. The Noncommunicable diseases (chronic diseases) programme of the WHO European Regional Office promotes a comprehensive approach to tackling NCDs which simultaneously:

- promotes population-level health promotion programmes;
- promotes disease prevention programmes;
- actively targets groups and individuals at high risk; and
- maximizes population coverage of effective treatment and care,

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while systematically integrating policy and action to reduce inequalities in health (1).

Such an approach requires integrated action on risk factors and their underlying determinants across sectors, combined with efforts to strengthen health systems towards improved prevention and control (1).

Risk factors (tobacco, alcohol, low fruit and vegetable intake, physical inactivity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, overweight and obesity, raised blood sugar) the main contributors to the burden of disease from NCDs, accumulate throughout the life course and have economic, social, gender, political, behavioral and environmental determinants. They interact in complex ways with other

determinants of health in the attribution of disease. People in low socioeconomic groups have at least twice the risk of serious illness and premature death of those in high socioeconomic groups (1).

The goal of the strategy is reaching a health-promoting Europe free of preventable noncommunicable diseases, premature death and avoidable disability.

Burden of diseases in Romania is dominated by cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), neuropsychiatric diseases, unintentional injuries and malignant neoplasms.

The first 4 conditions that account for approximately 90% of all burden of disease among males and females, as percentages of total DALYs (2002):

Rank disability group	males	females	
	Total DALYs%		Total DALYs%
1. CVDs	26.0	1. CVDs	27.4
2. neuropsychiatric	16.0	2. neuropsychiatric	20.5
3. unintentional injuries	12.2	3. malignant neoplasm	11.8
4. malignant neoplasm	11.6	4. digestive diseases	7.0

Source: Highlights on Health in Romania 2005(2)

Main causes of death in Romania in 2002: the main NCDs accounted for about 90% of deaths, external causes accounted for about 6%, communicable diseases accounted for about 1%. In

total, 61% of all deaths were caused by diseases of circulatory system. Tumors accounted 16.38%, digestive system 5.83%, accidents 5.30%, respiratory system 5.30%.

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Total deaths in Romania in 2002 (%):

Condition	total deaths (%)
Selected noncommunicable diseases	89.7
Cardiovascular diseases	61.0
<i>Ischemic heart diseases</i>	20.6
<i>Cerebrovascular diseases</i>	19.6
<i>Diseases of pulmonary circulation and other heart diseases</i>	6.5
Malignant tumors	15.5
<i>Trachea/bronchus/lung cancer</i>	3.1
<i>Female breast cancer</i>	2.0
<i>Colon/rectal/anal cancer</i>	1.5
<i>Prostate</i>	1.3
Respiratory diseases	6.0
<i>Chronic lower respiratory diseases</i>	2.5
<i>Pneumonia</i>	3.0
Digestive diseases	6.0
<i>Chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis</i>	4.4
Neuropsychiatry disorders	1.2
Communicable conditions	1.3
<i>HIV / AIDS</i>	0.1
External causes	5.7
Unintentional	4.2
<i>Road traffic injuries</i>	1.1
<i>Falls</i>	0.6
Intentional	1.5
<i>Suicide</i>	1.2
<i>Homicide</i>	0.3
Non defined conditions	0.1
All Causes	100.0

Source: Highlights on Health in Romania 2005(2)

Gaining health promotes six key messages:

1. Prevention throughout life is effective and must be regarded as an investment in health and development.
2. Society should create health-supporting environments, thereby also making health choices easier choices.
3. Health and medical services should be fit for purpose, responding to the present disease burden and increasing opportunities for health promotion.
4. People should be empowered to promote their own health, interact effectively with health services and be active partners in managing disease.

5. Universal access to health promotion, disease prevention and health services is central to achieving equity in health.
6. Governments at all levels have the responsibility to build healthy public policies and ensure action across all sectors concerned.

The strategy states that effective interventions already exist for the prevention and control of NCDs, to prevent or modify risk factors, progression of diseases to prevent disability and early death.

80% of the reduction in coronary heart diseases (CHDs) mortality in Finland during 1972-1992 has been explained by a decline in the major risk factors. In Ireland almost 48.1% of the reduction of CHDs mortality during 1985-2000 has been attributed to the improving population risk factors (1).

Five key principles are reaffirmed in order to guide policy development at all levels in a country (1):

- The ultimate goal of health policy is to achieve the full health of everyone;
- Closing the health gap between and within countries;
- People's participation;
- Health development can be achieved only through multisectorial strategies;
- Every sector of society is accountable for the health impact of their activities.

Investing in prevention and improved control of NCDs would improve the quality of life and well-being of people and societies.

This action-oriented strategy, adopted by the WHO Regional Committee for

Europe in September 2006, promotes a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling diseases in the European Region.

A comprehensive approach to tackling NCDs needs to combine integrated action on risk factors and determinants across sectors with efforts to strengthen health systems toward improved prevention and control. In these terms, *Gaining health: the European strategy for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases* provides Member States with an opportunity to bring together relevant strategies and action plans within a reinforcing framework.

This strategy has as basic document the EUR/RC56/8 and its proposals of a European Strategy for the Prevention and Control of NCDs with the goal of avoiding premature deaths and significantly reducing disease burden from NCDs through integrated actions, improving the quality of life and making healthy expectancy more equitable within and between Member States. This strategy was adopted as a strategic framework for action by Member States in the European Region to implement it in their country policies.

REFERENCES

1. Gaining Health: the European Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases. <http://www.euro.who.int>
2. Highlights on health in Romania 2005. <http://www.euro.who.int/highlights>