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UN urges action on ‘slow-motion catastrophe’ of non-communicable diseases



An unhealthy diet is one of the major risk factors for a range of chronic diseases linked to obesity

28 April 2011 – The head of the United Nations World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) warned today that the “slow-motion catastrophe” of non-communicable diseases could overwhelm even the wealthiest nations if the root causes of the epidemic, mostly lifestyle decisions, are not addressed.

Margaret Chan, the WHO Director-General, [told](#) delegates at the [First Global Ministerial Conference on Healthy Lifestyles and Noncommunicable Disease Control](#) in Moscow that the fact the many of the chronic non-communicable illnesses in the developed world are treatable might lead people to overlook the real causes.

“In wealthy countries, deaths from heart disease and strokes have declined significantly, cancer patients are being cured or surviving longer and people with diabetes have better access to essential and effective treatments,” said Dr. Chan.

“When drugs are available to reduce blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and improve glucose metabolism, the situation looks somehow under control. This appearance is misleading. The root causes of these diseases are not being addressed.”

Dr. Chan pointed out that worldwide obesity rates had almost doubled since 1980, and that the epidemic of diabetes, which is closely associated with obesity and urbanization, had skyrocketed

in both rich and poor countries. More than 40 million pre-school children across the world are obese or overweight.

“The consequences for societies and economies are devastating everywhere, but most especially so in poor, vulnerable, and disadvantaged populations,” said Dr. Chan. “Health services are almost totally unprepared to cope with the onslaught of chronic demands that come with the rise of non-communicable diseases.”

She noted that in large parts of the developing world, those diseases are detected late, when patients need extensive and expensive hospital care for severe complications. Many cancer patients sought treatment so late that the only viable option was pain relief and dignified death.

The diseases delivered “a two-punch blow to economies and development,” causing billions of dollars in losses of national income, and pushing millions of people into poverty every year.

Dr. Chan noted that although the health sector bore the brunt of the diseases, most preventive policies fell within non-health sectors, including trade, agriculture, customs, industry, urban design, and education, where good policies could lead to government approaches that made healthy choices easier.

As an example, the Director-General said the industrialization of food production and the globalization of its marketing and distribution have brought processed foods, rich in fat, sugar, and salt, but low in essential nutrients, into every corner of the world.

“In many cases, highly processed foods are the cheapest and most convenient way to fill an empty stomach. The world certainly needs to feed its nearly 7 billion inhabitants. But we do not need to feed them junk food,” she said.

“In the absence of urgent action, the rising financial burden of these diseases will reach levels that are beyond the capacity of even the wealthiest countries in the world to cope.”

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