Non-communicable Diseases

What are they?
According to the World Health Organization (WHO) non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are those that are not passed from person to person. These diseases progress slowly and over a long time. Children, adults and the elderly are all at risk for NCDs. The leading risk factors for such conditions include unhealthy diets, not being physically active, exposure to tobacco smoke and the effects of the harmful use of alcohol. There are four main types of NCDs, which are heart diseases, cancers, chronic lung disease and diabetes.

Why are they on the increase?
The WHO reported in 2008 that a staggering nine out of ten deaths (90%) in Ireland were due to non-communicable diseases such as cancer, diabetes and lung diseases. In 2010 it was reported in the Global Status report on non-communicable diseases that 87% of deaths in Ireland were due to NCDs, so there has been no improvement. 29% of these NCD deaths were cancer related; 34% due to heart disease; 2% from diabetes; 7% as a result of lung diseases and other NCDs were responsible for 15%. Major contributors to the rise in these diseases are based on behavioural risk factors, such as daily smoking and lack of physical activity; and metabolic risk factors (those that affect the working of normal chemical processes in the body), such as raised blood pressure, blood sugar, overweight/obesity, and cholesterol. More than half of the burden caused by NCDs could be avoided through successful health promotion initiatives.

The Cost
The cost of the rapid rise of NCDs will affect social, economic, and health dimensions globally. Unhealthy lifestyles continue to spread and fuel the problem. Characteristics of the population play a large role in the burden of diseases. Lifestyle behaviours are strongly influenced by socio-economic status, levels of education, employment and housing. Ireland’s income group is viewed to be high, yet it is estimated that 87% of all deaths are caused by NCDs. It is estimated that by 2020, the number of adults in Ireland with NCDs will increase by about 40%.

Healthcare is the second largest cost for Ireland. Spending towards diagnosis and treatment services for diseases and injury more than doubled between 2000 and 2009. In addition, Ireland suffers a huge economic burden due to obesity, which is a leading risk factor for many NCDs. According to a study conducted at the University College Cork by Professor Ivan Perry and his team, the estimated annual cost of obesity is €1.13 billion, which is over a third of the overall direct health care costs. Diabetes is a NCD closely associated with obesity, and the treatment cost of diabetes is estimated to be €600 million a year.

Prevention initiatives and health promotion are the most important measures that have to be taken. It is too costly to rely on combatting NCDs through treatment measures, and most country’s health service structures are unprepared to respond to such a new and growing
problem. The Irish population continues to age and with that there is an increased risk of chronic diseases. Cost-effective prevention policies will soon be a large asset for Ireland’s economic recovery programme.

Solving the Problem
The WHO published a 2008-2013 Action plan of the global strategy for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases. This action plan calls for countries to implement anti-tobacco measures to reduce public exposure. A global plan on diet and physical activity to promote and protect health is also called for. Ireland published Your Health is Your Wealth in 2012, followed by Healthy Ireland: Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing in 2013. Both documents call for action within all levels of the country, from patients to Government and healthcare workers to target the problem in forms of prevention and chronic disease care. Creating healthy generations of children is the first step for the betterment of society and is crucial to Ireland’s future.

Children are the foundation of a country’s population and they are the most important target group when it comes to building positive health habits and limiting damaging ones. Young people make up the largest cohort in the world. Inadequate physical activity and unhealthy diets can result in high blood pressure and overweight/obesity in younger age groups. These are factors that can trigger NCDs such as heart diseases, diabetes, and cancers. Parents need to lead by example and help teach their children healthy dietary and physical activity habits that will stick with them for life. Laying down the groundwork in early years will help prevent damaging lifestyle choices that adolescents may make as they develop. Assuring a healthy development into adulthood benefits all of Ireland as it allows for a healthy workforce and an improved quality of life. Health promotion responsibilities need to be shared across all sectors of society for more effective results.
References


