

Why focus on ageing and health, now?



In the 21st century, the world is rapidly changing. Economies are globalizing, more and more people live and work in cities, technology is evolving rapidly and there are fewer extended families. One of the biggest social transformations is the ageing of populations worldwide. In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, every country is facing the challenge of population ageing, with minor variations in magnitude and pace.

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**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Why is it urgent and highly important for all of us to focus on ageing and health as a theme for World Health Day 2012?

First, there will be more older persons than ever before

The number of people aged 60 and above today is double what it was in 1980, and the absolute number of persons aged 60 years and over is expected to increase from 605 million to 2 billion by 2050.

We have been adding years to life: longevity has increased to a global and regional average of 69 years of life. In 1955, the life expectancy for a person in the Eastern Mediterranean Region was approximately 44 years; today, in less than 50 years, a child born in the Region would be expected to live for approximately 77 years.

More persons than ever before will live to see their 80s or 90s. The number of persons aged 80 years or over, for example, will have almost quadrupled to 395 million between 2000 and 2050. Our region is witnessing an increase in the number and percentage of the population aged 60 and over. In 2000, the number of persons in the Region aged 60 years and older was around 26.8 million (5.8% of the total population). It is projected that in 2025, older persons will make up nearly 8.7%, and by 2050 nearly 15% of the population. There is no historical precedent for a majority of middle-aged and older adults having living parents. More children will know their grandparents and even their great-grandparents, especially their great-grandmothers, since on average, women live six to eight years longer than men globally.

Soon, the world will also have more older persons than children. Within the next five years, for the first time in history, the number of adults aged 65 and over will outnumber children under the age of 5. By 2050, these older adults will outnumber all children under the age of 14.

Second, the most rapid ageing is in less developed countries

Less developed countries will see the fastest change. By 2050, 80% of older adults will reside in low- or middle-income countries, a reverse of what we see today. There is a risk that health systems with poor resources (human and financial) may not give due priority to the care of the elderly at the expense of other programmes. In many countries, insufficient financial and human resources are allocated for the care of older people. Health care professionals with specialist training in the care of the elderly are still rare among practitioners in both the public and private sectors. Health professionals in medical, nursing and paramedical streams receive limited training in the health care of the elderly. Although not enough resources are allocated for older people care, it is obvious that health needs do not stop at a particular stage of life

Third, noncommunicable, chronic diseases and disabilities are on the rise

Seventy-five per cent of all deaths due to noncommunicable diseases, or 26 million a year, occur in adults over the age of 60. In 1900, people primarily died because of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza or polio. This trend has changed considerably. Today, the greatest causes of disease among all countries are noncommunicable, chronic diseases such as heart disease and stroke, cancer, asthma and diabetes. Major depression, a mental disorder, is one of the largest causes of disease worldwide; it makes coping with everyday life difficult and may end with loss of life.

Chronic conditions have a rather slow onset and take years to develop and manifest themselves. As these conditions start much earlier than we would imagine, healthy behaviours in childhood are the foundation for good health later in life.

Moreover, older persons often have several conditions at the same time, such as diabetes and heart disease. In fact, half of adults over the age of 80 in high-income countries have two or more chronic conditions. Having several diseases may lead to chronic disability, which can profoundly affect people's ability to maintain a job or pursue daily activities such as shopping for groceries or bathing. As a result of continuous urbanization and the disintegration of the system of extended families, the conventional assumption that the elderly are largely supported by the traditional extended family in terms of care and shelter is becoming questionable. For many chronic conditions, the ability of patients to live on their own is greatly reduced; as a result, they may depend on long-term care in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other residential settings. And when disease is terminal, adequate access to palliative care is essential for dying with dignity.

Despite this positive trend of longer life expectancies worldwide, which reflects the outcome of decades of successful health and sanitation measures, special health challenges arise that require health providers and societies to be prepared to meet the needs of older populations, health professionals in old age care to be trained and age-friendly settings established. And as people live longer, it is important to ensure that their added years are healthy, so that health care costs can be kept manageable. Healthy older people represent a valuable resource for their families, communities and economies

In all countries there is urgent need for the care of older people to be an integrated component of health and social care packages, national development programmes, and emergency preparedness and response.

We are all invited to develop a new vision of ageing and health, not only on World Health Day, but also in the months and years to come. Healthy older people in our region can play an active and vital role in our rapidly changing communities.