

Urgent, concerted efforts needed to stem diabetes epidemic: WHO

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World Health Day this year focuses on diabetes and calls for scaling up efforts to prevent, care for and detect the disease to arrest the global epidemic which is hitting the low and middle income countries the most.

It is celebrated on 7 April every year to mark the anniversary of the founding of WHO in 1948.

Each year a theme is selected that highlights a priority area of public health.

The Day provides an opportunity for individuals in every community to get involved in activities that can lead to better health.

WHO is focusing global attention on diabetes on World Health Day 2016, with the focus in the region on prevent, treat and beat diabetes.

Countries in the Region must take vigorous and concerted action to 'prevent, treat and beat' diabetes, a potentially fatal disease that has reached epidemic proportions and is expected to further increase in coming years.

"Diabetes rarely makes headlines, and yet it will be the world's seventh largest killer by 2030 unless intense and focused efforts are made by governments, communities and individuals," Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia, said ahead of World Health Day which is celebrated on 7 April every year.

"Diabetes is of particular concern in the Region. More than one out of every four of the 3.7 million diabetes-related deaths globally occur in the Region, while its prevalence exacerbates difficulties in the control of major infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Almost half of the 96 million people suffering the disease don't know they have it. If diabetes prevalence continues to rise, the personal, social and economic consequences will deepen," she said.

Nearly 90% of all diabetes cases are of Type 2 diabetes, largely the result of excess bodyweight and physical inactivity.

It is both preventable and treatable if detected early.

If not properly managed the disease causes serious damage to every major organ in the body, resulting in heart attacks, strokes, blindness and nerve damage.

"There are individual steps that we can, and must take. Eating healthily and avoiding sugary drinks is a good place to start. We must also control our portion sizes, and ensure they are matched to our energy needs rather than the size of our plate," Dr Khetrapal Singh said.

Regular exercise - 30 minutes, and at least five times a week - is necessary for adults to help control weight.

Governments must regulate the marketing of food to children, and insist on accurate food labeling to help consumers make decisions that can help them avoid diabetes.

Taxing sugary beverages and re-investing the revenue in health promotion activities is an evidence-based intervention that makes real change, she said.

Dr Khetrapal Singh said that governments must also increase access to health care and promote educational campaigns regarding self-management and control, as well as making treatment less costly.

Diabetes can be managed successfully. It does not have to lead to complications or be fatal, Dr Khetrapal Singh said.

Early detection and strict adherence to management strategies is essential to limit diabetes-related complications.