

POLICY PAPER

# How self-care contributes to the risk-reduction, prevention & management of NCDs

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# Introduction

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) **account for 75% of non-pandemic global deaths**<sup>1</sup> in 2021, with billions affected by conditions such as hypertension and diabetes. Yet, despite their overwhelming burden, NCDs remain critically underfunded, receiving **less than 2%**<sup>2 3</sup> of **Official Development Aid**. Progress on implementing WHO-endorsed NCD policies has stalled, and access to affordable diagnosis, treatment, and care remains **out of reach for hundreds of millions**. Meanwhile, **global conflicts, climate change, and widening socioeconomic disparities** continue to derail efforts to improve NCD and mental health outcomes.



The **2025 fourth high-level meeting<sup>4</sup> of the UN General Assembly** on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases and the promotion of mental health and well-being is an opportunity to change course. To make real progress, national policymakers and global partners must break down silos and commit to **integrated, life-course solutions** that not only strengthen healthcare systems but also empower individuals at all stages of their life. Self-care—ranging from health literacy and digital tools to access to quality non-prescription medicines—must be recognized as a critical, cost-effective strategy to both prevent and manage NCDs. Many countries are already leveraging self-care interventions to ease pressure on overstretched primary healthcare (PHC) systems and advance **Universal Health Coverage (UHC)**<sup>5</sup>. Scaling these approaches could significantly improve health outcomes while delivering **economic gains of over \$230 billion in low and middle income countries (LMICs) by 2030**.



This paper makes the case for **prioritizing self-care** as a central pillar of the global NCD response. It explores proven self-care strategies that enhance PHC and UHC, empowering people to take an active role in their health. Finally, it outlines three key asks for the 2025 HLM, ensuring self-care is firmly embedded in the next Political Declaration on NCDs and Mental Health.

<sup>1</sup> Non Communicable Disease. World Health Organization. 23 December 2024. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> Financing NCDs. NCD Alliance. 2023. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> How to get involved – fourth high level meeting on the UN General Assembly on the prevention and control of NCDs. World Health Organization. 15 March 2025. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Universal Health Coverage: report by the Director General. World Health Organization. 23 December 2024. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

# 1 The self-care NCD continuum

Self-care is defined by WHO<sup>6</sup> as

*“the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker.”*



The self-care continuum below, as adapted from the 2021 work from the self-care forum, demonstrates the importance of self-care from prevention to treatment of NCDs. This can be seen in preventative measures such as **brushing teeth, eating healthily, or choosing to do exercise**. It is also relevant in actively managing symptoms including self-monitoring blood glucose and blood pressure and using products available without a prescription to **add fiber, fill nutrient gaps, reduce risk for cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity, or help people quit smoking**. In this way, self-care is essential to achieving the goals developed by WHO in its Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2030<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Self-Care for health and well-being. World Health Organization. Date Unknown. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

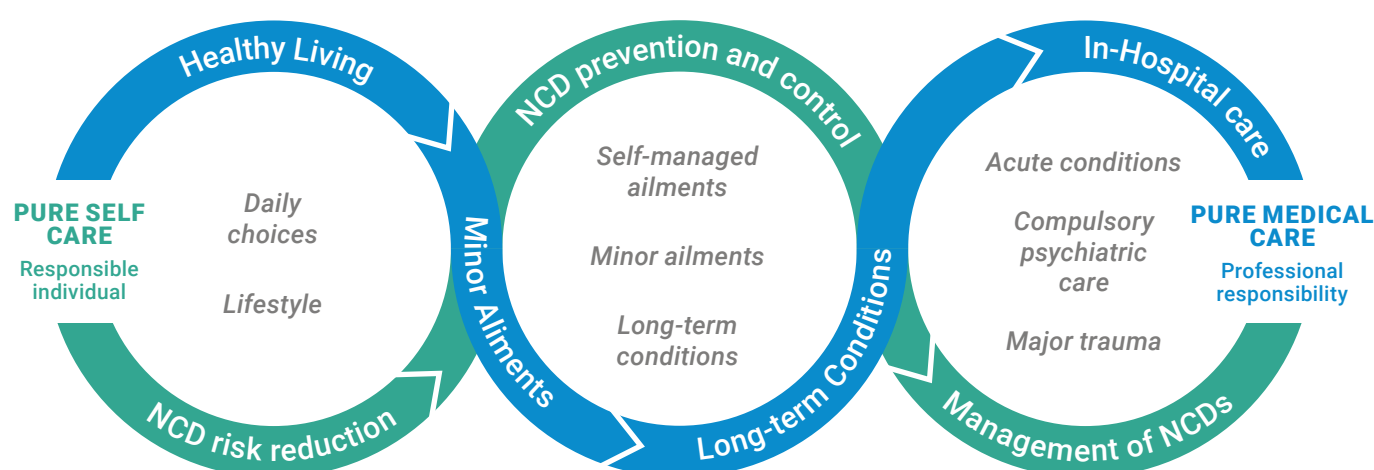
<sup>7</sup> The Self-Care Continuum. Self-Care Forum. 2012. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> Implementation roadmap 2023-2030 for the Global action plan for the prevention and control of NCDs 2013-2030. World Health Organization. 2021. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

The scope of self-care in non-communicable diseases specifically includes:



ILLUSTRATION 1. THE SELF-CARE CONTINUUM (Self care Forum, 2020 - adapted)





## 2 Relevance of self-care for NCD risk factors

Modifiable behaviours, such as tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet and the harmful use of alcohol, all increase the risk of NCDs. According to recent data published by the [World Health Organization](#)<sup>9</sup> and [Pan American Health Organization](#)<sup>10</sup>, and drawing on [2021 findings from the Global Burden of Disease](#)<sup>11</sup>:



Tobacco accounts for the deaths of over **8 million people** each year (including from the effects of exposure to second-hand smoke).



Over half of the **3 million** annual deaths attributable to alcohol use are from NCDs, including cancer.



**4.1 million** annual deaths have been attributed to excess salt/sodium intake.



**1.6 million** deaths annually can be caused by insufficient physical activity.



LMICs are increasingly struggling to contain the emergence of these risk factors. In many of these countries, an assessment of the environmental, social and commercial drivers linked to NCDs is required to support those in need. In addition, because of the long-term nature of NCDs, people living with NCDs are constantly challenged to assess their medical situation and to make informed decisions about it. One of the every-day hurdles involves **access to medicines**, including non-prescription medicines, which make up [WHO's 2023 Model List of Essential Medicines](#)<sup>12</sup> as some of the treatments recommended for NCDs. For instance, ibuprofen, acetylsalicylic acid, paracetamol, fluoride toothpaste and Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRT) are listed as medicines for pain and palliative care. Fiber supplementation, omega-3 fatty acid supplementation, aspirin to reduce the risk of second heart attacks, and the range of aids that support millions of people to quit smoking every year are all examples of where products available without a prescription can fill gaps or otherwise reduce some of these risks.

<sup>9</sup> Tobacco Key Facts. World Health Organization. 31 July 2023. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> Non-Communicable diseases. Pan American Health Organization. Date Unknown. Available at [\(link\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> Global Burden of disease 2021: Findings from the GBD 2021 Study. A report by IHME Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. 16 May 2024. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> WHO Model Lists of Essential Medicines. World Health Organizations. July 2023. Available at: [\(link\)](#)

### 3 Improving access to NCD care through self-care

Investing in self-care strategies at the national, regional and global level **enables countries to avoid one of the main hurdles** for the treatment and management of NCDs: **the lack of access to medicines, diagnostics and healthcare technologies.**

Self-care can also play a role in **reducing unnecessary expenses for healthcare systems**. At the global level, current self-care activities are generating substantial monetary savings as well as healthcare workforce savings, totaling at least approximately **\$119 billion per year**<sup>13</sup>. Evidence also suggests that the impact on global productivity when over-the-counter treatment is adopted at first, generates approximately 40.8 billion productive days, corresponding to a value of **\$1,879 billion in welfare effects**<sup>14</sup>. Looking at the future, the cost saving effect is estimated to be approximately \$178.8 billion per annum, with **increased productivity gains of**

**71.9 billion** productive days per annum. Adding other positive effects brought by other self-care practices, such as preventive care, oral health care and the use of vitamins and mineral supplements will further increase the overall gains. These figures are relevant in the context of **limited resources available for prevention, diagnosis and treatment of NCDs**. Through self-care, governments would not only benefit from a decrease in expenses, but individuals suffering from NCDs would have a much higher quality of service from healthcare providers and increased access to essential healthcare tools.

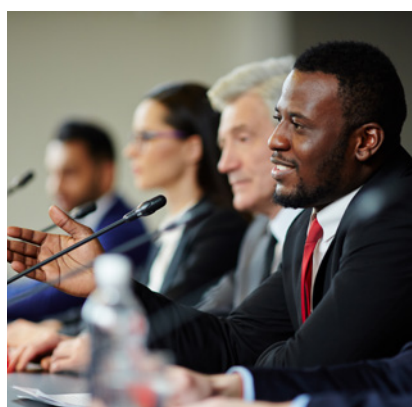
<sup>13</sup> Economic and Social Value of Self-Care. A report by the Global Self-Care Federation. 24 June 2022. Available at: ([link](#))

<sup>14</sup> Untapped Potential: unlocking self-care for global health progress. A report by Bayer, Global Self-Care Federation and BCIU Business Council for International Understanding. 2024. ([link](#))

## 4 Health literacy and health promotion

Health literacy and health promotion are also key factors in the fight against NCDs and reducing risk factors. The 2018 Political Declaration on the third High-Level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of NCDs<sup>15</sup> urges Member States to “empower the individual to make informed choices by providing an enabling environment, strengthening health literacy through education and implementing population-wide and targeted mass and social media campaigns that educate the public”.

### OUR 3 ASKS FOR THE FOURTH HIGH-LEVEL MEETING OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF NCDs



1

For member states to affirm the importance of self-care as a key tool to reduce the burden of NCDs globally and the strain on healthcare systems, and to integrate it into national UHC frameworks.



2

For the link between self-care and NCD risk-reduction, prevention and management to be explicitly recognized within the 2025 Political Declaration as a critical area for action.



3

For the importance of self-care to be acknowledged for its vital role in empowering individuals to manage their health and improve health outcomes.

<sup>15</sup> Political Declaration of the 3rd High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases: a resolution/ adopted by the General Assembly. United Nations. 2018. Available at: ([link](#))





## Conclusion

Self-care is an essential yet often overlooked pillar in the global fight against NCDs. As healthcare systems face increasing pressure from rising NCD prevalence and limited resources, integrating self-care into policy frameworks presents an opportunity to empower individuals, reduce the burden of disease, and improve health outcomes at scale. GSCF calls on governments and international stakeholders to recognize self-care as a fundamental component of the fight against NCDs and to incorporate self-care solutions into national policies, regulatory frameworks, and UHC strategies to this end. With the 2025 HLM on NCDs and Mental Health approaching, now is the time to embed self-care into political commitments, ensuring that people worldwide have the knowledge, tools, and support needed to take charge of their health.



<sup>20</sup> Antiseptic mouth rinses: an update on comparative effectiveness, risks and recommendations. American Dental Hygienists' Association. February 2013. Available at: [jdh.adha.org](http://jdh.adha.org) ([link](#)).

<sup>21</sup> Global strategy and action plan on oral health (2023–2030). World Health Organization. 24 May 2024. Available at: [www.who.int](http://www.who.int) ([link](#))



## About GSCF

The Global Self-Care Federation is dedicated to a world where self-care increasingly contributes to better health and more sustainable healthcare systems. We represent associations and manufacturers in the self-care industry, working closely with our members and relevant stakeholder groups to ensure evidence-based self-care products and solutions are recognized as key contributors to health for individuals and systems worldwide.

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