

# MAKING HEALTH OUR TOP PRIORITY IN 2024

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Our health is determined by where we live, work, and engage in other activities, which brings in factors such as urban planning and environmental pollution that are sometimes beyond our control. People walk near India Gate in Delhi amid a thick layer of fog. | Photo Credit: Shashi Shekhar Kashyap

The 2023 Navaratri festivities in Gujarat were overshadowed by the news that 10 people had purportedly died of heart attacks in a span of 24 hours. What is even more disconcerting is that the victims ranged from a 13-year-old to middle-aged individuals, dispelling the myth that heart-related issues primarily afflict the elderly. This alarming trend is not just confined to Gujarat; it is found across the nation, marking a paradigm shift in India's disease burden. While communicable diseases persist as a significant threat, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases have emerged as the predominant public health concern.

According to a World Health Organization (WHO) report titled 'Invisible Numbers', a staggering 66% of deaths in India in 2019 were attributed to NCDs. The report also suggests that 22% of individuals aged 30 or older in India would succumb to NCDs before their 70th birthday, surpassing the global probability of 18%. While the spectre of NCDs presents a challenge, the good news is it is never too late to invest in health. The fact is that NCD-led deaths are largely preventable, and the solution lies in the choices we make in our daily lives.

The silent epidemic of NCDs is fuelled by common behavioural risk factors — unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity, the use of tobacco and alcohol — which are all on the rise in India. This epidemic is further spurred by factors including a genetic predisposition towards conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, and a sedentary lifestyle, which also brings with it issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. India bears the dubious distinction of being the diabetes capital with 101 million diabetics and 136 million with prediabetes. Cardiovascular diseases top the mortality charts, and cancer incidence is projected to rise by 57.5% by 2040. This health crisis not only affects individuals but also poses a substantial economic burden. The World Economic Forum estimates that India could incur a staggering cost of \$4.58 trillion between 2012 and 2030 due to NCDs and mental health conditions.

As India aspires to become a \$5 trillion economy by 2027, the growing incidence of NCDs is a pressing concern. While the government has launched initiatives such as the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases, and Stroke, and the 75/25 initiative, the onus now lies on individuals to take charge of their health.

As we step into a new year, it is important that we choose to make health our top priority. While New Year resolutions are made only to be broken a few months later, this is one resolution that we can no longer afford to break.

Our health is determined by where we live, work, and engage in other activities, which brings in factors such as urban planning and environmental pollution that are sometimes beyond our control. However, what we can control is what we put in our bodies, how we move through the day, and how we stay ahead of illnesses by taking health check-ups regularly. What we can manage is our daily lifestyle, by making healthier choices, and this is where micro-habits — small, manageable actions that fit effortlessly into our daily routines — can make a difference.

First, we can integrate more natural movement into our daily lives. For instance, we can walk where possible instead of taking a vehicle. Just 30 minutes every day can increase cardiovascular fitness, strengthen our bones, reduce excess body fat, and boost muscle power and endurance

Second, we can choose 'slow food' over fast food. Food that is prepared with the ingredients that are right for us and food that is consumed with appreciation. There is a connection between the food we eat and the health of our environment, our communities, and ourselves.

Third, we can take out a few hours once a year and get a comprehensive health check-up. We need to change our attitude from 'it's better not to know' to 'it's best for me to be proactive so that I can overcome it'.

Fourth, we can make health a dinner table and water cooler conversation. We ask our colleagues and loved ones about their day, their achievements, their plans, so why not ask what they did for their health? How much did they walk? Do they feel anxious? It is only by normalising this conversation can we truly stay one step ahead of health issues.

Winning the war against NCDs is not just vital for individual well-being; it's a decisive factor in safeguarding the health of the nation. By embracing sustainable healthy habits today, we commit to making healthier choices for 365 days and beyond. This resolution transcends personal improvement; it represents a collective dedication to shaping a healthier, more prosperous India.

The power to transform the nation lies in the daily choices of its citizens, reflecting a profound understanding that the well-being of individuals directly impacts the well-being of society. In committing to Resolution 2024, we recognise that small, consistent actions, when multiplied across millions, can generate a seismic shift in the health landscape. It is a call-to-action resonating with the belief that the strength of a nation is rooted in the vitality of its people. As we embark on this journey towards a healthier India, we are laying the foundation for a brighter future for ourselves and for generations to come.

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