

Towards a Health-First India

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Towards a Health-First India: The Role of Preventive Healthcare

Context:

India is facing a “**silent epidemic**” of **non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and respiratory illnesses. These account for **over 66% of all deaths** and pose a serious challenge to public health and the country's economic future.

As per national and WHO data:

- **Over 5 million deaths** annually are attributed to NCDs.
- Around **22% of Indians** face the risk of **premature death (before age 70)** due to NCDs.
- Economic losses from NCDs could reach **\$3.5-4 trillion by 2030**.

In this backdrop, **preventive healthcare** emerges as a crucial approach to safeguard both health and economic stability.

What is Preventive Healthcare?

Preventive healthcare focuses on **avoiding the onset of diseases** through early detection, lifestyle modification, and timely interventions rather than waiting for symptoms to appear.

It involves:

- **Regular screenings** (e.g., blood pressure, diabetes),
- **Healthy lifestyle practices** (diet, exercise, mental well-being),
- Use of **technology** such as wearables and AI-based health monitoring apps.

Examples include Ayushman Bharat's **Health & Wellness Centres** for rural screening and the **National Cancer Screening Programme** for early detection.

Importance of Preventive Healthcare in India

- **Rising NCD burden:** NCDs are the leading cause of death in India, causing **more than 5 million deaths annually**.
 - **Youth and workforce at risk:** Rising obesity and hypertension in young adults threaten India's demographic advantage.
 - **Economic impact:** The cost of NCDs is projected to be **\$3.5-4 trillion by 2030**, affecting productivity and growth.
 - **Lifestyle connection:** Around **80% of heart attacks and strokes** are linked to poor lifestyle choices and are preventable.
 - **Digital potential:** With **750+ million smartphone users**, India can scale up AI-powered health alerts and digital screenings.
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Challenges to Preventive Healthcare in India

- **Low awareness:** Most people seek care only after symptoms appear. Only **30% of urban adults** go for regular check-ups.
- **Urban-rural gap:** Rural areas lack access to basic diagnostics and healthcare professionals. The doctor-patient ratio is **1:1457**.
- **Low public investment:** India spends only **2.1% of GDP** on healthcare, much lower than the **OECD average of 8-10%**.
- **Cultural mindset:** The belief that "**no illness means no need to visit a doctor**" hampers early detection.
- **Weak corporate role:** Fewer than **10% of companies** offer structured health and wellness programs to employees.

Way Forward: Strengthening Preventive Healthcare

- Strengthen **Ayushman Bharat's Health & Wellness Centres** and regulate the contents of processed and packaged foods.
- Promote large-scale public campaigns such as **Eat Right India** and **Fit India Movement** to encourage healthy habits.
- Encourage private companies to conduct **annual health screenings** and employee wellness programs.
- Leverage **technology and AI** for early risk prediction through apps, wearables, and digital platforms.
- Design cities that support active lifestyles by ensuring **walkable spaces**, green areas, and public fitness infrastructure.

Conclusion

Preventive healthcare is **India's most effective tool** to combat the growing threat of NCDs and mitigate economic losses. A shift towards prevention—through **policy reform, digital innovation, and public awareness**—can ensure a healthier population and a stronger economy. Building a **"health-first" mindset** is essential for securing long-term national well-being and development.

