



Taking action on chronic disease

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In much of North American society, chronic diseases are a leading cause of death. These include cancers, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes among others. Largely preventable, chronic diseases kill many, but they also diminish the quality of life for millions of others. As demographics result in a population that is proportionately older, the rising burden of chronic disease on the health care system will also become unsustainable.

Population health measures can make a huge difference in the fight against chronic disease. What does that mean?

When an individual decides to exercise more or quits smoking, that is a very specific action that helps them fight chronic disease. But when population-wide measures such as building walking tracks or promoting healthy lifestyles are implemented, these often have much the same impact across the population instead of just one person. These are called population or public health measures. Rather than helping just one specific individual, they help whole groups of people.

There is a strong association between four underlying, and modifiable, risk factors and the most common chronic diseases. They are tobacco and alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and unhealthy eating. Improve one or more of these and your population will see less chronic disease.

Preventing chronic diseases is helped by public health interventions that combat these four key risk factors. The result is a reduction in the burden of chronic

disease. An Ontario report called Taking Action to Prevent Chronic Disease offers a number of recommendations to combat the four common risk factors.

First, reduce the use of tobacco. This can be done by increasing or maintaining high tobacco taxes and using proceeds for tobacco control programs. Ensuring broad access to a tobacco cessation system is an important element to a comprehensive strategy. A sustained social marketing campaign that motivates tobacco users to quit, and informs tobacco users of the dangers of all types of tobacco use is equally important.

Reducing the consumption of alcohol is another important strategy. Pricing and limited access to alcoholic products in combination with targeted control over advertising can all contribute.

Recommendations to promote physical activity include making it an integral part of school curricula, supporting 'active transportation' with walking and cycling infrastructure. Add in healthy eating as a goal and your population becomes healthier over time.

Building capacity is another crucial strategy. This means adopting a whole-of-government approach for the primary prevention of chronic disease whereby all departments and ministries are cognisant of the role they can play in supporting a healthier population.

These specific ideas and recommendations may focus on Ontario, but they are universal. Indeed, many of them are already in place in British Columbia, but we can never let down our efforts to reduce chronic disease.

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