

ADVOCACY BRIEF

The 4th UN High-level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases: Activating prevention as a high-impact health intervention

MAY 2025

URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

- Despite being preventable, rates of cancer and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are rising rapidly worldwide
- The burden of NCDs is straining economies and health systems
- Progress is very far behind for countries to reach SDG target 3.4 by 2030, and action needs to be taken now

Prevention is a high-impact intervention for health and economies

This year's 4th UN High-level Meeting is the moment for countries to commit to **bold, strategic, and measurable targets** in the Political Declaration to reduce rates of cancer and NCDs worldwide.

Activating **prevention as a high-impact and cost-effective health intervention** can support a future with fewer cases of cancer and NCDs, alongside fewer costs to human lives, health systems, and economies. Member States should adopt commitments within the Political Declaration to:

- 1 Speed up 'Best Buys' policy implementation
- 2 Implement National Cancer Control Plans, with prevention actions and indicators
- 3 Invest in NCDs and prevention measures
- 4 Address health inequities
- 5 Protect policy-making from health-harming industry interference



The global burden of non-communicable diseases

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) cause 75% of global deaths. Forty percent (40%) of these deaths are occurring in the prime years of life, before the age of 70. Low- and middle-income countries bear the greatest burden, accounting for 82% of premature deaths.¹

Cancer is the second most common cause of NCD-related deaths, and rates are rising rapidly. New cases are expected to increase from 20 million to 35 million per year by 2050 – a 77% increase.

Progress is very far behind for countries to reach SDG target 3.4 by 2030 – only 19 countries (just 2.7% of the global population) are on track to reduce the risk of premature death from NCDs by one-third. At this rate, it would take 45 years and lead to over 6 million preventable deaths by 2030, and more than 40 million by 2060.²

Prevention is a high-impact and cost-effective health intervention

Approximately 40% of cancers are preventable, especially when risk factors such as **unhealthy diets, overweight and obesity, physical inactivity, and alcohol consumption**, as well as air pollution and tobacco use, are addressed. Incorporating prevention into the Political Declaration is crucial to the success of the High-level Meeting as it offers the most effective and affordable long-term method of NCD and cancer control.

To achieve this, World Cancer Research Fund International recommends the following commitments and aims be incorporated into the Political Declaration:

1 Speed up 'Best Buys' policy implementation

The WHO NCD Best Buy policies are **the most cost-effective and feasible policies to prevent cancer and other NCDs**.³

Evidence has shown that these policies can create health-promoting environments and reduce harm from modifiable risk factors for cancer and other NCDs, while offering a high return on investment.

These policies reduce exposure to harmful products (like alcohol and foods that are high in fat, sugar, and salt), improve access to healthy diets, provide support to maintain a healthy weight, and opportunities to increase physical activity.

2 Implement National Cancer Control Plans, with prevention actions and indicators

National Cancer Control Plans (NCCPs) improve cancer outcomes,⁵ yet **only 30% include cancer prevention actions and indicators**⁶ – this is a hugely missed opportunity.

By integrating and financing NCCPs that prioritise prevention, Member States would be committing to an effective, affordable and targeted strategy to reduce cancer incidence and improve outcomes.

Prevention is the most cost-effective way to address cancer: easing the burden on healthcare systems and budgets, while also reducing reliance on expensive, often out-of-pocket or inaccessible treatments.

This includes incorporating prevention strategies for alcohol and tobacco control, addressing the obesity pandemic, and increasing physical activity; as well as funding for cancer research, and providing cancer services like vaccination against viruses that can cause cancer (such as HPV and hepatitis B) and increased screening for common cancers (like breast, colorectal and cervical cancers).⁶

How can 'Best Buys' and other recommended policies reduce cancer and other NCDs?



Improve food systems through reformulation* and increase access to healthy diets



Implement health taxes on alcohol* and unhealthy foods that can fund prevention programmes



Empower consumers with front-of-pack nutrition labels* and behaviour change campaigns*



Promote physical activity through primary care,* urban planning, and campaigns



Reduce alcohol availability* and strengthen marketing restrictions*



Protect, promote, and support breastfeeding for better health outcomes

* Identified as 'Quick Buys': policy interventions that can have measurable effects within 5 years (with implementation and enforcement)⁴

3 Invest in NCDs and prevention measures

NCD financing is a lifesaving investment. Financial and technical contributions need to be scaled up to match the global disease burden: **NCDs cause 75% of global deaths, yet only receive 2% of development assistance**. This must change, especially in low- and middle-income countries, which carry the highest emerging rates of NCDs.

Beyond health impacts, NCDs increase healthcare costs, reduce productivity, and weaken economies. Committing to scaling-up investment is essential: **every \$1 invested in cost-effective interventions** like the WHO Best Buys yields **at least \$7** in returns through better health, employment, productivity, and economic stability.⁷

Revenues from health taxes on health-harming products (like unhealthy food and alcohol) can further fund prevention initiatives and programmes. Investing in NCDs offers economic rewards in the short- and long-term, and means healthier, more resilient populations and health systems.

Every \$1 invested in NCDs yields at least \$7 in returns

4 Address health inequities

Cancer disproportionately affects marginalised and lower-income populations, not only from higher mortality, but also through increased exposure to health-harming products like unhealthy food and alcohol.

More focus is needed on the social and commercial determinants of health and their impact on rates of cancer and NCD prevention and care.^{8,9}

Committing to address NCD risk factors – including by addressing the affordability, marketing and wide availability of unhealthy products, high prevalence of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, and pollution – is key to reducing health inequities for people living in low-income and rural areas.

Comprehensive strategies that limit harmful exposures while increasing access to healthy diets, physical activity, and clean air are essential for equitable cancer prevention and care.

5 Protect policymaking from health-harming industry influence

The Political Declaration and NCD policymaking processes at the national level **must be safeguarded from the influence of health-harming industries.**

Alcohol, unhealthy food, tobacco and fossil fuels cause 19 million deaths annually⁹ – these health-harming industries are continuing to drive up already high rates of cancer and other NCDs around the world.

These industries regularly use a range of political, legal and economic tactics – such as lobbying and coalition-building – to avoid regulation and prioritize their profits ahead of public health. In line with the Bridgetown Declaration,¹⁰ Member States should commit to protecting policymaking processes from the influence of health-harming industries, prioritise and protect health over corporate profits, and safeguard populations across all income settings.



ACTION NEEDS TO BE TAKEN ON NCDs – NOW.

Prevention is a high-impact and cost-effective health intervention that is beneficial for population health, health systems, and economies.

World Cancer Research Fund International urges Member States to adopt these five recommended policy areas and commit to their inclusion in the Political Declaration. To achieve SDG 3.4 before 2030, **commitments must be turned into tangible and realistic actions.**

World Cancer Research Fund International supports Member States in their pursuit of a bold and actionable Political Declaration, and committing to a future with fewer cases of cancer and NCDs, and fewer costs to human lives, health systems, societies and economies.



Working with and beyond the health sector

Meaningful engagement with civil society actors, like World Cancer Research Fund International, in preparation for the UN High-level Meeting will support action on cancer and NCDs at global and country levels.

It is also important to engage with sectors and ministries beyond health to support interventions on NCDs, and promote and protect health equitably. Patient advocates and persons with lived experience of NCDs should also be involved to provide first-hand expertise on what it is like to experience cancer or other NCDs, and what barriers and burdens need to be addressed.

Endorsement

The contents of this advocacy brief are endorsed by Union for International Cancer Control (UICC).

World Cancer Research Fund International is pleased to endorse NCD Alliance's Time to Lead campaign, and UICC's High-level Meeting Advocacy Asks.

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About us

World Cancer Research Fund International is a leading authority on the links between diet, nutrition, weight and physical activity and cancer. We are an international not-for-profit association that leads and unifies a network of cancer prevention charities, including the **American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR)**, **World Cancer Research Fund** in the UK and **Wereld Kanker Onderzoek Fonds** in the Netherlands. World Cancer Research Fund International is in official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO).

For more information on our policy recommendations to prevent cancer:

Resources for policymakers on key issues related to cancer prevention are available (wcrf.org/research-policy/library). This includes:

- Policy Blueprint for Cancer Prevention (wcrf.org/research-policy/policy/blueprint-for-cancer-prevention)
- Alcohol and Cancer Risk position statement (wcrf.org/research-policy/library/alcohol-and-cancer-policy-position)
- Dietary and Lifestyle Patterns report (wcrf.org/DLP).

Check out our NOURISHING and MOVING databases: a repository of global data on nutrition and physical activity policy actions (policydatabase.wcrf.org).

Our policy statements, including those delivered at previous WHO meetings (wcrf.org/research-policy/library).

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