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Chronic diseases a global problem requiring global solutions, researchers say

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Policymakers should increase their sense of urgency to stop the global spread of chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes that threaten the health and economies of industrialized and developing nations alike, Emory University global health researchers say.

Writing in the current issue of The New England Journal of Medicine, authors K. M. Venkat Narayan, MD, Mohammed Ali, MBChB, MSc, and Jeffrey Koplan, MD, MPH, assert that the worldwide spread of chronic conditions, also known as noncommunicable diseases, offers a unique opportunity for low-, middle- and high-income countries around the globe to unite in their efforts to find tangible solutions for reducing the health and economic burdens of these diseases.

Chronic diseases account for 60 percent of all deaths worldwide. Trends also suggest that the major risk factors for these diseases - hypertension, high glucose levels, obesity, and inactivity - are all on the rise, especially in developing countries. Six out of the 10 risk factors for mortality worldwide are related to chronic noncommunicable diseases, and not infections or lack of nutrition, as was previously the case.

In addition to the health consequences, the long-term costs of treatment of chronic ailments and the negative effects on productivity take devastating tolls on the economic situations of individuals, families and countries. According to estimates, China, India and Britain will lose $558 billion, $237 billion, and $33 billion, respectively, in national income over the next decade as a result of largely preventable heart

disease, strokes and diabetes. In the U.S., cardiovascular disease and diabetes together cost the country $750 billion annually.

"There is a unique opportunity now for global cooperation to tackle noncommunicable diseases," says Narayan, professor of global health and epidemiology at Emory's Rollins School of Public Health and professor of medicine in the Emory School of Medicine. "In fact, unless noncommunicable diseases are tackled, goals relating to child health and infectious diseases cannot be achieved nor can economic development be sustained."

Narayan and his co-authors also cite examples of how global cooperation and connections have benefited the movement to reduce chronic disease, including the development and testing of a new screening test for cervical cancer in India that could result in a lower cost screening test for millions of women worldwide.

More information: The Perspectives article, "Global Noncommunicable Diseases - Where Worlds Meet," was published in the Sept. 15 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* and is available at www.nejm.org

Provided by Emory University

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