A few, largely preventable, risk factors account for most of the world’s disease burden. Chronic diseases are the major cause of death and disability worldwide, and increasingly affect people from developing as well as developed countries. This reflects a significant change in diet habits, physical activity levels, and tobacco use worldwide as a result of industrialization, urbanization, economic development and increasing food market globalization.

Noncommunicable conditions, including cardiovascular diseases (CVD), diabetes, obesity, cancers and respiratory diseases, account for 59% of the 56.5 million deaths annually and 45.9% of the global burden of disease. Half of these (17 million annually) are CVD, the majority heart disease and stroke. Five of the top 10 selected global disease burden risk factors identified by World Health Report 2002: reducing risks, promoting healthy life - obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, alcohol and tobacco – independently and often in combination, are the major causes of these diseases.

The scientific evidence is strong that a change in dietary habits and physical activity can powerfully influence several of these risk factors in populations. Recognising this, WHO is adopting a broad-ranging approach and has begun to formulate a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, under a May 2002 mandate from the World Health Assembly (WHA). This extensive, population-wide, prevention-based strategy will be developed over the next two years and presented to the WHA in 2004.

This will become the strategic backbone for WHO and its Member States to work together with other stakeholders in promoting global changes towards healthier diets and increased physical activity, to prevent chronic diseases and promote population health.
WHAT IS HAPPENING?

People worldwide are consuming more foods that are energy-dense - high in sugar and/or saturated fats - or excessively salty.

Nutrition transition and increasingly sedentary behaviour is occurring at a much faster pace in developing countries than was the case for developed. Chronic diseases are becoming increasingly prevalent in many of the poorest developing countries, creating a double burden on top of the infectious diseases that continue to afflict these countries.

While an optimal diet is critical, daily moderate-intensity physical activity is well-established as an important determinant for good health, helping lower blood pressure, reduce body fat and improve glucose metabolism. Daily physical activity can also help reduce osteoporosis and falls among older people.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Established scientific evidence suggests there are major health benefits in:

• Eating more fruit and vegetables, as well as nuts and whole grains;
• Daily physical activity;
• Moving from saturated animal fats to unsaturated vegetable oil-based fats;
• Cutting the amount of fatty, salty and sugary foods in the diet;
• Maintaining a normal body weight (within the Body Mass Index (BMI) range of 18.5 to 24.9);
• Stopping smoking

MULTI-FACETED APPROACH IS REQUIRED

The causes of NCDs are complex and the response needs to be multi-faceted and multi-institutional. The evidence is overwhelming that prevention is possible when sustained actions are directed both at individuals and families, as well as the broader social, economic and cultural determinants of NCDs.

The benefits of behavioural interventions in reducing the rates of CVD, cancers and diabetes in populations have been well-proven in countries such as Finland, Japan and Singapore. Cost-effective behavioural and pharmacological treatments for high blood pressure, diabetes and raised cholesterol have life-saving impacts and should be routinely implemented at the primary health care level. Dietary, physical activity and smoking cessation programmes should be integral to both the prevention and management of chronic diseases. Good health demands a “Life Course” approach to eating and physical activity that begins with pre-pregnancy, includes breast feeding, and extends to old age.

WHO has begun to engage constructively with all stakeholders in developing its Global Strategy. It believes that governments, health professionals, the food and advertising industries, and wider civil society should all contribute to making the easy choices the healthy choices, both for diet and physical activity.