Why assistive technology is essential

Assistive products, such as wheelchairs, hearing aids and glasses enable people to live healthy, productive, independent and dignified lives.

Without assistive products, people may be excluded from education, employment and civic life; they might risk poverty or become a burden to their families.

Assistive products are vital for people with disabilities, for those affected by chronic diseases and for people experiencing gradual cognitive and physical decline due to aging.

Assistive technology by numbers

Today, more than 1 billion people around the world need assistive technology: that means approximately 1 in 6 people.

With populations aging and chronic diseases rising across the world, this number is likely to rise above 2 billion by 2030, with many people needing two or more products as they age.

Assistive products are not accessible to the majority of people who need them. In fact, only 1 in 10 people worldwide have access to assistive devices.

For example, 75 million people globally need a wheelchair but only 5–15% of the population has access to one.

466 million people need hearing aids, however the productions of these products meets only 10% of global need and 3% of the need in low-income countries.

970 million people need glasses worldwide, but over 200 million people do not have access to spectacles or other low-vision devices.

The reasons for the substantial gap between need and access are: lack of awareness at all levels, scarce availability and high cost of products, and shortage of trained personnel able to provide basic assistive products.
Honouring global targets by expanding access to assistive technology

Addressing the unmet need of assistive products is crucial to advance Universal Health Coverage, the Sustainable Development Goals and to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by 177 countries.

‘Leaving no one behind’ means ensuring that people with disabilities, the older population and those affected by chronic diseases are included in society and enabled to live a healthy and dignified life.

Universal Health Coverage can be advanced inclusively only if people are able to access quality assistive products when and where they need them, without facing financial hardship.

What WHO is doing

WHO established the Global Cooperation on Assistive Technology (GATE) in 2014 to ensure that everyone, everywhere has access to affordable and high-quality assistive products.

In 2016, based on the model of the WHO Essential Medicine List, GATE released the first global Priority Assistive Products List, which includes the 50 assistive products most needed in all healthcare systems and which governments should ensure are available and affordable to all citizens.

GATE is also supporting Member States to develop policy frameworks, provision and procurement standards as well as appropriate training to ensure good practices, sustainability and full access to these vital products.

“Our governments have a responsibility of meeting their global and regional commitments. In view of the evolving needs of populations, access to assistive technology is as important as access to other technologies.”

Saira Afzal Tarar, National Health Services Federal Minister, Pakistan