The World Health Report 2002 measures the amount of disease, disability and death in the world today that can be attributed to some of the most important risks to human health. Even more importantly, it also calculates how much of this present burden could be avoided in the next decades.

The World Health Report 2002 represents one of the largest research projects ever undertaken by WHO, in collaboration with experts worldwide. Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of WHO, describes this report as "a wake up call to the global community".

The report quantifies some of the most important risks to human health, and examines a range of methods to reduce them. The ultimate goal is to help governments of all countries to lower major risks to health, and thereby raise the healthy life expectancy of their populations.

The risk factors range from underweight and unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene to high blood pressure, raised cholesterol and obesity.

The report’s findings give an intriguing – and alarming – insight into not just the current causes of disease and death and the factors underlying them, but also into human patterns of living and how some may be changing around the world while others remain dangerously unchanged.

"The world is living dangerously - either because it has little choice, or because it is making the wrong choices"

"This report helps every country in the world to see what are the most appropriate, most cost-effective measures it can take to reduce risks and promote healthy life for its own population. Reducing risks to health is the responsibility not only of governments. It rightly remains a vital preoccupation of all people, in all populations. In this World Health Report, there is a message - and a potential benefit - for everybody."

— Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General, WHO
Enemies of health

According to the report, at the same time that there are 170 million children in poor countries who are underweight—and up to six million of them die each year as a result—there are more than one billion adults worldwide who are overweight, and at least 300 million who are clinically obese.

Underweight is most prevalent among children under five years of age, and WHO estimates that approximately 27% of children in this age group are underweight. It was a contributing factor in 60% of all child deaths in developing countries.

The report says HIV/AIDS is now the world’s fourth biggest cause of death. Current estimates suggest that more than 95% of the HIV infections prevalent in Africa in 2001 are attributable to unsafe sex. In the rest of the world, the 2001 estimates for the proportion of HIV/AIDS deaths attributable to unsafe sex range from 13% in East Asia and the Pacific to 94% of the deaths in Central America.

About two million deaths a year worldwide are attributed to unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene, mainly through infectious diarrhoea. Nine out of 10 such deaths are in children, and virtually all the deaths are in developing countries.

Iron deficiency is one of the most prevalent nutrient deficiencies in the world, affecting an estimated two billion people, and causing almost a million deaths a year. Globally, indoor air pollution is estimated to cause 36% of all lower respiratory infections, 28% of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 22% of tuberculosis, 11% of asthma and about 3% of lung cancers.

The report shows that obesity is killing about 220 000 men and women a year in the United States of America and Canada alone, and about 320 000 in 20 countries of Western Europe.

The report traces the rapid evolution of the tobacco epidemic by showing that the estimated number of attributable deaths in the year 2000 – 4.2 million – is about 45% greater than what it was in 1990, with the increase being most marked in developing countries. Worldwide, alcohol caused 1.7 million deaths and loss of 56 million disability-adjusted life years. Alcohol is estimated to cause globally, 20-30% of oesophageal cancer, liver cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, homicide, epilepsy, motor vehicle accidents, and other intentional injuries.

Recommended actions

- Focusing on major risk factors.
- Formulating risk prevention policies, including more support for scientific research, improved surveillance systems and better access to global information.
- Giving top priority to developing effective, committed policies for the prevention of globally increasing high risks to health, such as tobacco consumption, unsafe sex in connection with HIV/AIDS, and in some populations unhealthy diet and obesity.
- Strengthening international and intersectoral collaboration to improve risk management and increase public awareness and understanding of risks to health.
- Ensuring a balance in action between government, community and individual.

The top 10 selected risks to health

1. Underweight
2. Unsafe sex
3. High blood pressure
4. Tobacco consumption
5. Alcohol consumption
6. Unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene
7. Iron deficiency
8. Indoor smoke from solid fuels
9. High cholesterol
10. Obesity

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