

The Finnish Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Alliance is an advocacy and outreach network of the country's largest, public health, patient and health professional organisations. It includes the Finnish Brain Association, Finnish Lung Health Association, Organisation for Respiratory Health in Finland, Finnish Medical Society Duodecim, Finnish Diabetes Association, Finnish Association for Mental Health, Finnish Heart Association and the Cancer Society of Finland. Network members encompass the major disease groups with respect to public health and the economy. The combined membership of the Finnish NCD Alliance participants is 330 000.

Government Programme objectives

The health of the population has improved significantly in the last 40 years. This has been the consequence of the societal policy promoting health and welfare that has been pursued, the improvement of living conditions and the development of health care. However, mental health has not improved, nor has the physical health of people with a low level of education and income. Resolute and far-reaching policy solutions are imperative, so that the health of people in Finland continues to improve and socio-economic and regional health inequalities even out.

Societal policy

Society does not flourish without population well-being: well-being and health have an impact on learning ability, working and functional capacity, and the scope for people to be dynamically involved in the activities of society and their local communities. Neglecting health promotion and disease prevention would cause medical care costs of disease and the economic losses to society to increase intolerably.

Health promotion requires societal policy decisions and the involvement of different sectors of society. Government must ensure that it is easy to lead healthy life styles. Policy decision-making usually assesses financial and often environmental impacts, but rarely consider the welfare and health impacts of decisions.

The impacts on welfare, health and equity of societal policy decisions must be assessed in advance, and taken into account in the preparation and implementation of legislation, taxation, allocation of state funds and the government's main programmes. The impact of public sector decision-making on welfare, health and equality between different population groups must also be systematically assessed retrospectively.

Health service policy

According to studies by the OECD the Finnish health care system is one of the most unequal among Western countries: the use of treatment and their costs are distributed unequally between population groups. The social welfare health care reform (SOTE) provides an opportunity to develop service availability to better meet current needs. The financing of health care must also be reformed so that costs are shared more equally than at present.

The implementation of social welfare and health care reform (SOTE) must ensure the availability of cost-effective care based on need and fairness in funding. Comprehensive preventive services and early disease detection must be ensured. Health promotion work that remains in the hands of municipalities must be planned and carried out on a cross-administrative basis.

Research

Finnish public health hinges on comprehensive and reliable reserves of data and high quality research. Data obtained from research can be used to promote the health and welfare of the population, and prevent illnesses linked to life style and the environment.

The public health knowledge base and research resources must be safeguarded. Attention must be given to the goal of reducing health disparities and to the needs of the ageing population. The main criteria for the development and use of new health care technology must be their health benefits as indicated by research.

A programme for cross-sectoral non-communicable disease prevention

Our population is ageing and the size of the working-age population is declining, impairing the dependency ratio. If the working and functional capacity of the working-age population is improved, it will be possible to increase the employment rate.

Chronic illnesses, such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases (including cerebrovascular disorders), respiratory diseases, diabetes and mental health disorders (in particular depression) constitute a significant proportion of our disease burden, including sickness absenteeism, premature retirement, and treatment costs. All of these non-communicable diseases can be prevented significantly by lifestyle changes: reducing the use of tobacco products and alcohol, healthy eating and sufficient exercise. Mental health can be bolstered through secure growing and living environments.

It is necessary to continue with efforts for ending the use of tobacco products by 2040. Urgent measures are needed to intervene in the alarming spread of snus use and to prevent the proliferation of electronic cigarettes and other tobacco-like products. There must be a further reduction in exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.

Alcohol consumption must be reduced. The most effective means to achieve this are through restrictions in availability and through pricing, but there must also be a total reform of alcohol policy. Healthy nutrition can be promoted by measures that impact availability, taxing, contents and other quality criteria and marketing of various types of foodstuff. There must be a focus on the quality of mass catering and on other subsidised meals (such as by using the meals with the Heart Symbol). Daily and recreational physical exercise can be promoted through community planning methods and by creating opportunities for increased physical activity within work, school and day care. Resources and good interaction promote environments that contribute to preventing violence, bullying and abusive behaviour, and to supporting mental stability.

Establish a cross-sectoral non-communicable disease prevention programme to improve healthy environments, promote healthy lifestyles by influencing the public's knowledge of health, as well as the prices, availability and safety of products and services with important health impacts.

Reform tobacco legislation to respond to the altered operational environment and aim to make Finland tobacco free by 2040.

Conduct a fundamental reform of alcohol policy based social and health policy requirements.

The associations involved in the Finnish NCD Alliance will provide their knowledge and expertise for the planning and carrying out of the above programme. They are already now involved in a number of activities aimed at improving the health of the population and preventing chronic diseases in collaboration with the public sector.