

*Editorial*

# Can lifestyle modification change the trajectory of non-communicable diseases? Role of lifestyle medicine for a healthy life

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Studies by the Indian Council of Medical Research have shown startling statistics.<sup>[1]</sup> Today, one in three Indians has hypertension, four in five suffer from dyslipidemia (abnormal levels of cholesterol or triglycerides in the blood, increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke), and one in four has diabetes or prediabetes. A study with 19 lakh participants showed that one in two Indians has diabetes or prediabetes. These trends are equally prevalent in rural and urban areas, underscoring the urgent need for action.<sup>[2,3]</sup> The alarming rise of obesity in India has made it the diabetes capital of the world, forcing the World Health Organization to reduce the cutoff values of BMI defining overweight and obese Indians.<sup>[4]</sup> Now, obesity is defined as a metabolic disorder. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have a genetic predisposition with epigenetic and environmental influence. Weight loss is a challenging process, and lifestyle modification is the gold standard for obesity management despite the emergence of various pharmacological and surgical interventions. The multisystem involvement, multiple etiologies, varied dietary and lifestyle, cultural beliefs, and habits pose challenges.<sup>[5,6]</sup> Hence, with the evolution of Lifestyle Medicine, a novel approach to managing and treating NCDs with lifestyle intervention is effective by addressing your habits. By targeting the root causes of these illnesses, Lifestyle Medicine emphasizes sustainable lifestyle changes to improve health outcomes, reduce dependency on medications, and potentially reverse disease progression. By empowering individuals to adopt healthier habits and integrating lifestyle medicine (LM) into public health policies, India can ensure prevention, enhance well-being, and pave the way for a healthier, more sustainable future.

LM focuses on evidence-based lifestyle interventions and is a powerful approach to prevent and manage NCDs by addressing risk factors like unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and stress.

LM aims to prevent NCDs from developing in the first place and to manage them effectively in individuals who already have them.

## SIX PILLARS OF LIFESTYLE MEDICINE

**Nutrition:** Emphasizing a balanced diet rich in whole foods, fruits, vegetables, and lean protein while limiting processed foods, sugary drinks, and unhealthy fats.

**Physical activity:** Encouraging regular exercise to improve cardiovascular health, manage weight, and boost overall well-being.

**Sleep:** Promoting adequate and quality sleep to support physical and mental health.

**Stress management:** Implementing techniques to reduce stress, such as mindfulness, yoga, or spending time in nature.

**Social connection:** Fostering strong social relationships and a sense of community to combat loneliness and isolation.

**Avoidance of harmful substances:** Discouraging tobacco use, excessive alcohol consumption, and other substance abuse.

LM recognizes that health is a holistic concept, encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being.

LM is a comprehensive approach to redefine how we approach health: shifting the focus from treating diseases to fostering wellness and resilience.<sup>[7-11]</sup> As there is an alarming surge in NCDs due to urbanization, technological advancements, and sedentary lifestyles, India confronts a significant health crisis. Diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, cancer, obesity, and cardiovascular conditions now dominate the nation's health burden, affecting both rural and urban populations. The urgency to address this epidemic should stimulate the integration of LM into India's public health strategy.

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To integrate LM into India's healthcare system, it is important to take some relevant actions like aligning LM principles with national programs, capacity building by integrating LM modules into medical, nursing, and allied health curricula, and educating citizens on LM benefits using national platforms and community settings. Digital tools can be used for LM education, behaviour tracking, monitoring clinical parameters, and providing affordable and acceptable healthy lifestyle solutions for all. Robust health data systems to support and track region-specific interventions, foster partnerships across health, education, agriculture and food processing, science and technology, environment, and urban planning sectors can be developed.<sup>4</sup>With India's elderly population projected to exceed 20% by 2050, LM plays a crucial role in healthy aging, extending lifespan, and improving health span, as highlighted by programs such as the Longevity India Initiative. Early interventions, such as regular health screenings and active ageing, will reduce healthcare costs and support economic productivity as the population ages. By aligning LM with Vision 2047 and the Sustainable Development Goals, India can lead the world in preventive healthcare and sustainable living. India can address its growing NCD burden, ensure equitable access to healthcare, and build a healthier, more productive society

By aligning LM recommendations with some of the national initiatives like the Fit India Movement, the National Program for NCDs, the Smart Cities Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and the National Education Policy 2020, we can promote healthier lifestyles, prevent NCDs, and enhance quality of life. This integration ensures that LM becomes a simple adjunct of ongoing efforts, creating a cohesive approach to addressing India's health challenges. Encouraging physical activity, fostering healthy nutrition, enhancing sleep hygiene, promoting social and mental well-being, and addressing environmental health are the recommendations for tackling health issues like NCDs and improving outcomes. LM is not just about preventing disease but also about creating environments where healthier choices become the most accessible and natural options.

The launch of weight loss drugs, for example, has fueled a misconception that obesity is like any other disease and can be cured with pills. We, as doctors of LM, advocate diet, physical activity, sleep, etc., while the pharma industry is bent on creating drug dependence. However, it needs to be addressed that these 'miracle' drugs have profound side effects. No drug can bring about natural homeostasis that LM can achieve, as it focuses on management for the improvement of overall health and not just weight management.

The Global Cardiovascular Risk Consortium analysed data from over 2 million people across 39 countries and found that the absence of just 5 classic risk factors at age 50 hypertension, hyperlipidemia, abnormal BMI, diabetes, and smoking—was associated with:

- 13.3 more years free of cardiovascular disease for women and 10.6 years for men

- 14.5 more years of overall life for women and 11.8 for men

An even more inspiring observation was that those who modified just one or two risk factors in their 50s—especially controlling blood pressure or quitting smoking gained significant years of life.

### KEY TAKEAWAY?

It's never too early or too late to take control of our health. Midlife changes matter. Preventive lifestyle strategies are not optional extras; they are life-extending essentials. This study adds to the growing evidence that LM is a powerful solution for global health and healthcare systems alike. Let's keep advocating, educating, and empowering.

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