



# Switzerland's National Non-communicable Diseases Strategy

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## Abstract

Among the major public health challenges, especially facing Switzerland is the growing burden of chronic non-communicable diseases is a forthcoming challenge (NCDs). Currently 2.2 million of a population of 8 million is affected with NCDs being responsible for 80% of health costs and nearly 60% of premature mortality. In early 2013 the Federal Council – Switzerland's highest executive authority – approved a comprehensive healthcare strategy entitled "Health 2020". In 2016 a National Strategy for the Prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases was adopted via a year-long consultation process. This strategy has four overarching long-term objectives: "to control the global burden of disease due to NCDs; to contain rising costs in the health sector; to reduce premature mortality; to maintain and enhance the productivity and social participation of the population". More specifically the NCD strategy aims to "reduce behavioral risk factors; improve health literacy; develop a health promoting environment; improve equity in access to health promotion and prevention; reduce the proportion of the population at increased risk of disease; improve the quality of life and reduce the need for care". In 2017, specific measures were adopted in order to ensure a reduction of risk factors for chronic non-communicable diseases and a reduction of the burden of disease due to these conditions. The long term success of this strategy will require the commitment of the many stakeholders in the health sector as well as cooperation between federal and cantonal authorities.

**Keywords:** Disease prevention; Chronic non-communicable disease; Health policy; Public health strategy

## Background

According to the OECD quality indicators, the Swiss health system is of high quality [1]. Indeed, over the past century much has been achieved. The infant mortality rate has dropped from 150/1,000 in 1900 to less than 4/1,000 in 2015. Life expectancy at birth has increased from 46 years for men and 49 years for women in 1900 to 81 and 85 years, respectively over the same laps of time [2]. Furthermore, around 90% of the population rate their quality of life (very) good [3]. Among highly educated persons 90.5% rate their health as (very) well; this proportion drops to 71.4% among those without post-compulsory education [3]. Public satisfaction with the health system is high and has increased over recent years: more than 80% of the population had a rather positive or very positive view of the health system in 2014 [4,5].

Yet Switzerland is facing major public health challenges – in particular, the growing burden of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Currently 2.2 million of a population of 8 million people is affected by NCDs, which are responsible for 80% of health costs and around 60% of premature mortality [6]. In addition, the prevalence of risk factors for NCDs remains high – for example, obesity/overweight, which affects 42.2% of the population [7]; smoking habits (25% of people aged over the age of 15, and around 37% of those aged 20 to 34) [8]; no or rare sporting activities (31%) [9]; and harmful alcohol consumption (30% of young male adults report at least one maximum alcohol consumption of >9 drinks on a single occasion over the last 12 months) [10]. Finally, cardiovascular diseases and cancers are the first and second leading causes of death in Switzerland and among the top ranking causes of Years of Life Lost (YLLs) and of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) [11].

Against this background, the federal health policy agenda "Health 2020" and the "National Strategy for the Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases" have been developed in a closely linked

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**Table 1:** The present Swiss health policy framework: Health 2020 [12].

Priority Areas	Global Objectives	Specific Measures
Ensure quality of life	Promote modern forms of health care delivery	Improve integrated healthcare from early diagnosis to palliative care
		Adapt long-term care so that nursing staff and structures appropriate to needs are available
		Establish research into healthcare delivery, improve clinical research, promote registries
	Complement health protection	Improve health protection by avoiding unnecessary medical exposure to radiation and by introducing supplementary health observation systems to prevent the population from being exposed to contaminants
		Control and eliminate antibiotic resistance to protect the health of people and animals
		Reduce avoidable infections in the hospital setting
	Intensify health promotion and disease prevention	Improve the prevention and screening for non-transmissible diseases with particular attention to promoting health in the workplace
		Promote mental health and improve prevention/early detection of psychiatric disorders
		Improve the prevention, early detection and control of addiction disorders, including new forms such as addiction to the Internet
Reinforce equality of opportunity and individual responsibility	Reinforce fair funding and access	Reduce incentives for insurers to select risks
Reinforce equality of opportunity and individual responsibility Safeguard and increase the quality of healthcare provision	Reinforce fair funding and access Keep health affordable by increasing efficiency	Intensify programs directed at vulnerable groups such as migrants, children and adolescents in order to meet their specific needs
		Take the individual's financial situation into account when determining the co-payment towards health costs
		Refine the system for determining the price of medicines, promote the use of generics, and eliminate perverse incentives
	Keep health affordable by increasing efficiency Empower insurees and patients	Increase the flat-rate remuneration mechanism, giving it precedence over item- of-service fees, and revise existing fee schedules
		Concentrate highly specialized medicine in order to eliminate inefficiency and duplication in infrastructure and to increase the quality of healthcare provision
		Take greater account of patients and insurees in health policy processes
	Empower insurees and patients Promote quality in services and healthcare delivery	Increase the health skills and individual responsibility of insurees and patients
		Place greater emphasis on patients' rights
		Implement the quality strategy in order to increase transparency
Safeguard and increase the quality of healthcare provision Create transparency, better control and coordination	Promote quality in services and healthcare delivery Make greater use of e-health	Reduce ineffective and inefficient services, medicines and processes in order to increase quality and lower costs
	Safeguard and increase the quality of healthcare provision Create transparency, better control and coordination Create transparency, better control and coordination	Promote quality in services and healthcare delivery Make greater use of e-health Make greater use of e-health More and well-qualified healthcare workers
Make greater use of e-health More and well-qualified healthcare workers		Introduce and promote e-medication, and increase patient safety by reducing errors
		Introduce and actively promote the electronic patient dossier
		Provide digital support for treatment processes using the electronic patient dossier to provide the necessary data
More and well-qualified healthcare workers		Train enough doctors and nurses in the relevant disciplines
		Promote basic medical care (i.e. at primary/GP level) and collaboration between the various healthcare professions
		Introduce a law regulating the healthcare professions to ensure the quality and skills of people trained in the new healthcare professions
Simplify the system and create transparency Simplify the system and create transparency		Improve supervision of health-insurance providers so that insurees are better protected
		Expand and improve the available data and their analysis (to enable the health system to be managed more efficiently)
	Simplify the system and create transparency Improve management of health policy Improve management of health policy Reinforce international integration	Simplify health insurance

Create transparency, better control and coordination	Simplify the system and create transparency Improve management of health policy Improve management of health policy Reinforce international integration Improve management of health policy Reinforce international integration Reinforce international integration	Reinforce collaboration and consultation between the federal government and cantons Introduce new ways of managing the system Unblock fee negotiations by drawing on existing and new responsibilities
	Improve management of health policy Reinforce international integration Reinforce international integration Reinforce international integration	The conclusion and implementation of the health agreement with the EU which has already been outlined will maintain or increase the level of protection Implementation of the country's foreign health policy, through the WHO, for example, will enable Switzerland to contribute to improving global health Targeted comparisons and close collaboration with countries which have similar systems to Switzerland's, specifically those in the EU, will provide input for the reform of the Swiss health system
	Reinforce international integration	

process.

### Health 2020 – Switzerland’s Comprehensive Healthcare Strategy

In early 2013, the Federal Council – Switzerland’s highest executive authority – approved an overall health strategy entitled “Health 2020”. A series of 12 objectives and 36 measures aim to ensure the quality of life, reinforce equality of opportunity, increase the quality of care and improve transparency (Table 1) [12]. The measures are to be implemented with the participation of all key stakeholders in order to favorably impact the health costs and readily face the upcoming public health challenges.

### The National Strategy for Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases

The NCD Strategy gives priority to disease prevention and health promotion, focusing on the most prevalent NCDs – i.e., cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and musculoskeletal disorders [13].

#### Elaboration of the NCD strategy

In late 2013, the “Dialogue on National Healthcare Policy” – a platform for the Swiss federal and cantonal authorities concluded that there was an urgent need to elaborate a national strategy for the prevention of NCDs [14]. In early 2014, almost 200 stakeholders representing health authorities, economic actors, health professionals, associations, foundations, etc. participated in an initial meeting on NCDs. Two working-groups were established: the first was tasked with identifying available data on NCD risk factors and existing cantonal/national prevention activities and disease-specific strategies; the second focused on ways of strengthening prevention in healthcare provision. Based on the reports of the two working-groups, a draft NCD Strategy was prepared by an extended steering committee, comprising representatives of federal and cantonal authorities, Health Promotion Switzerland, NGOs and the research community. By the end of 2015, this draft had undergone a lengthy consultation process involving the 200 stakeholders mentioned (Figure 1).

### National strategy for the prevention of non-communicable diseases (2017-2024)

The strategy has four overarching long-term objectives: “to control the increasing burden of disease due to NCDs; to contain rising costs in the health sector; to reduce premature mortality; to maintain and enhance the productivity and social participation of the population” [13]. More specifically, the NCD strategy aims to “reduce behavioral risk factors; improve health literacy; develop a health promoting environment; improve equity in access to health promotion and prevention; reduce the proportion of the population at increased risk of disease; improve the quality of life and reduce the need for care”.

The strategy concentrates on seven fields of action:

- **Retaining the gains and encouraging new approaches in health promotion and disease prevention:** The chosen approach focuses on preventing risk factors and strengthening protective factors. It targets all life phases (children, adolescents, adults, and elderly) and various settings (schools, workplaces, communities). It also specifically targets vulnerable population groups, such as migrants.
- **Integrating and strengthening prevention in health**

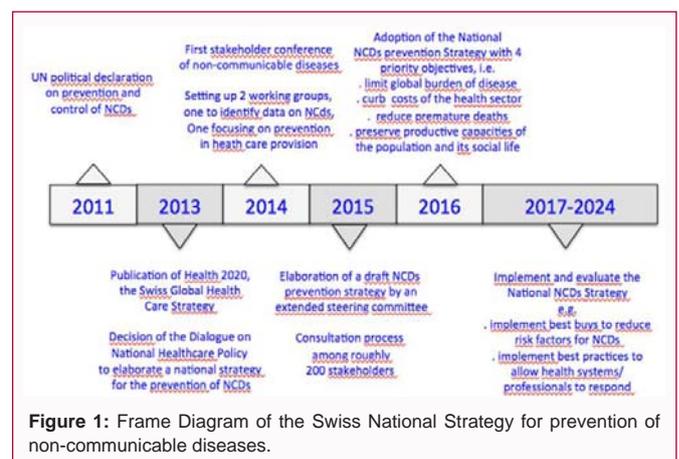


Figure 1: Frame Diagram of the Swiss National Strategy for prevention of non-communicable diseases.

**Table 2:** Main measures of the NCD action plan [15].

Population-based Health promotion and disease prevention	Prevention in healthcare	Prevention at the workplace
Strengthen tobacco and alcohol prevention and promote physical activities and balanced diet Specifically target children, adolescents, adults and elderly	Elaborate quality criteria	Add relevant health risk/protection factors to the job-specific stress survey tool
Standardize quality criteria requirements of funding proposals	Promote projects that strengthen prevention in healthcare	Expand existing health promotion tools for apprentices
Identify success factors of cantonal prevention programs	Identify funding options for preventive services	Establish institutional cooperation in the field of occupational health management
	Ensure basic and continuing education of healthcare professionals in the field of health promotion and disease prevention	Further develop «actionsanté» and promote healthy choices
	Improve the self-management of chronically ill persons and their relatives.	
	Promote the use of new technologies	

**Table 3:** Crosscutting measures of the NCD action plan [15].

Coordination and cooperation	Funding	Monitoring and research	Information and training	General Framework
Connect the various actors through existing and new networks	Use financial resources strategically	Monitor changes and trends in NCD-relevant indicators	Inform and raise awareness about NCDs	Implement legislation and support the cantons
Establish a National NCD stakeholder conference	Facilitate the financing of risk factor specific projects	Implement research, monitoring and evaluation in cooperation with the National Nutrition Strategy and ensure knowledge transfer.	Raise awareness of people in vulnerable situations	Strengthen health-promoting conditions via a multi-sectorial approach
		Evaluate funded projects	Strengthen the nutritional literacy of the population.	Represent interests and share experiences and knowledge at the international level
				Promote healthy meals and improve the quality of food

**care provision:** Guidelines for health professionals – and specifically general practitioners – are to be developed and distributed. Optimization of inter-professional collaboration and the development of networks are to be encouraged between care providers and health promotion institutions.

- **Improving coordination and cooperation:** Closer cooperation and coordination is to be pursued, in view of the extensive autonomy existing among the numerous stakeholders active in the field of disease prevention and health promotion. A stakeholder conference on NCDs is being instituted under the auspices of the Dialogue on National Health Care Policy in order to promote the exchange of experience and knowledge transfer.
- **Securing funding:** Additional funding is to be made available for prevention measures in healthcare provision and prevention measures targeting the elderly population.
- **Strengthening monitoring and research:** An NCD strategy monitoring is to be implemented in order to gather information on the burden of disease, risk factors, social determinants and specific vulnerable groups. More support is to be provided for research on prevention in healthcare services.
- **Promoting communication and training:** The public is to be actively informed about NCD issues and their causes. Children, young people and vulnerable groups are to receive special attention. Informing and training teachers and coaches of youth sport associations will be a priority.
- **Optimizing the general framework:** Decision-makers at all levels are to be made aware of the importance of NCDs and asked to assume their responsibilities. Multi-sector collaboration and international cooperation are to be strengthened.

**Measures to be implemented as part of the national NCD strategy**

The principal measures are divided into three areas [15].

Population-related health promotion and disease prevention targets people in their daily lives (settings) seeking to address risk factors of various population groups. These programs are primarily planned at the cantonal level and implemented by NGOs, health leagues, cities and municipalities. Prevention in health care is aimed at people who are already in contact with the health system because they suffer from a disease or are at increased risk to develop a specific disease. Here, physicians, nurses and other health professionals will play a key role. Prevention at the workplace emphasizes the role of the economy to public health, both as an employer and as a producer of services and products. Proposed measures are summarized in Table 2.

In addition, a series of crosscutting interdisciplinary measures should help to achieve the objectives of the NCD strategy. These relate to the areas defined in the strategy – i.e., coordination and cooperation, funding, research and monitoring, communication and training and the general framework. Several federal offices will be involved in implementing those crosscutting measures. More details are given in Table 3.

**Discussion**

In a federal state such as Switzerland, the existence of a national strategic plan for NCDs and related interventions is, in itself, a remarkable achievement, especially since it advocates focusing on disease prevention and health promotion. Yet its implementation is not without challenges. Indeed, the 26 Swiss cantons remain the key players in the health sector, with large degree of autonomy in health matters and with their own particular characteristics depending on their population (e.g. urban versus rural) or on their financial capacities (e.g. city cantons versus mountain cantons) [16]. Effective implementation of a national strategy such as that for NCDs thus requires *de facto* local commitment and a high degree of cooperation between the federal government and the cantons [17]. Furthermore, a large number of actors (health professionals, health leagues, social associations, interest groups, economic partners, etc.), who do not

always have the same interests or priorities, will have to commit themselves to the strategy if it is to succeed. Finally, adequate long term funding will have to be secured - an issue not yet settled. One aspect that may be critical in this regard is the reimbursement under the compulsory health insurance scheme of disease prevention and health promotion activities performed by physicians or other health professionals: indeed, this will require a minor “revolution”, since at present these are limited to few preventive measures, such as influenza vaccinations for patients with chronic diseases.

With its prevention strategy Switzerland is joining the efforts of many countries against NCDs, a worldwide public health problem [18]. Indeed, over the past decade, numerous countries have adopted similar national strategies for the prevention of NCDs (e.g. European countries, Iran, Ghana, Ethiopia, Brazil, Vietnam, Pakistan) based on UN and WHO recommendations [19-28]. Their successful implementation remains a public health challenge, and, as some authors have suggested, new/original approaches may need to be explored: “Harnessing the power of human rights to prevent and control NCDs can galvanize action toward meaningful change, broaden the number of actors and beneficiaries, and help strengthen the foundations for public health in the future” [29].

## Conclusion

In Switzerland, the prospects for successful implementation of the NCDs strategy are relatively good, since the strategy has been elaborated in a collaborative, participatory and consensus-building process involving large group of stakeholders. However, in a direct democracy such as Switzerland, political opposition may arise at any time.

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