

Self-care: India's first line of health defence

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As India continues to evolve as a dynamic and fast-growing economy, the health and resilience of its population will play a defining role in sustaining this momentum. The emphasis must now move beyond responding to illness towards empowering individuals to make informed, proactive choices that support long-term wellbeing. That is why self-care deserves greater attention in India's public health conversation.

The country today is facing a dual health challenge. While people are living longer and becoming more health conscious, the burden of chronic and lifestyle related diseases continues to rise. At the same time, rising medical expenses and growing pressure on health care infrastructure are making it increasingly important to find ways of keeping people healthier before they require medical intervention. Health care demand is expanding at a pace that no system can fully address through treatment alone. This makes prevention, health literacy and responsible self-care not only beneficial for individuals, but increasingly important for the long-term sustainability of health care systems.

Responsible self-care is becoming an important part of how countries build healthier and more resilient populations. For example, NHS England has a self-care policy which enables people to access self-care advice across several platforms including calls and community pharmacies while in certain Latin American countries, policies have expanded access to safe, self-administered reproductive health interventions.

In India, there is growing focus on preventive services and universal screening. More people are paying greater attention to nutrition, fitness, and everyday wellness, while becoming increasingly conscious about managing their health proactively. The next step is to ensure this intent is supported by credible information, trusted self-care solutions, and the confidence to make informed health decisions. When people are empowered to manage their everyday health responsibly, the benefits extend beyond individuals to families, workplaces, and the health care system.

Many of India's health challenges today are shaped by what happens outside hospitals, and the consequences are not limited to personal wellbeing. Everyday health concerns can influence workplace productivity, family wellbeing and economic participation. When common, preventable issues go unaddressed, the cumulative impact is felt not only by individuals but also by employers, communities and the health care system.

Fatigue, for instance, is becoming an increasingly common part of everyday life; 85% of young Indians reportedly wake up feeling tired, 81% experience an energy slump during the day and two in three say fatigue affects their ability to complete everyday tasks. Stress is another such factor. One in three Indians say stress has increased since the pandemic, while 93% of people who experience headaches believe stress makes them more frequent or severe.

These may seem like minor concerns, but their cumulative impact is anything but. When everyday health needs are neglected, they affect how people live, work, and participate in society. They also place avoidable pressure on healthcare systems that are already stretched.

Self-care is not about replacing doctors or encouraging self-diagnosis. It is about helping people recognise symptoms early, adopting healthier habits, using trusted solutions responsibly, and knowing when professional medical advice is needed.

Whether it is improving sleep and nutrition to address fatigue, managing stress to reduce recurring headaches, or supporting better menstrual and maternal health, timely action can prevent many common health concerns from becoming more serious. Small interventions when taken early can make a meaningful difference, not only to the individual but also to the efficiency of the wider health care system.

Creating a culture of responsible self-care will require collective action. First, health literacy must be strengthened so that people are better equipped to make informed decisions. Second, trusted health care professionals should play an even greater role in guiding responsible self-care and helping people know when medical intervention is needed. Finally, continued collaboration between government, health care providers and the private sector can help expand access to safe, science-backed self-care solutions and encourage preventive health practices at scale.

The WHO recognises self-care as a critical strategy for achieving universal health coverage and strengthening health systems. As India continues to invest in prevention and public health, it has a unique opportunity to make responsible self-care a foundational pillar of its health care journey.

Our healthcare future will not be shaped solely by the hospitals we build or the medicines we develop. It will be shaped just as much by how effectively we enable people to manage everyday health responsibly, and seek timely medical care when needed. By strengthening health literacy, expanding access to trusted self-care solutions, and fostering collaboration across the health care ecosystem, India can build healthier individuals, more resilient communities, and a stronger, more productive nation.

India's first line of health care is not the hospital. It is the informed citizen. The stronger that first line becomes, the stronger our health care system will be.

(The views expressed are personal)

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