

The killer quintet

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Two years ago, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Medical Council described the increase in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) as an 'emerging epidemic' and the 'biggest threat to South Africa's health'.



Dr Morgan Mkhathshwa, head of Operations at Bonitas Medical Fund

NCDs are associated with the way a person or group of people live, which is why they are called lifestyle diseases. They include atherosclerosis, heart disease and stroke, obesity and type 2 diabetes, as well as diseases associated with smoking, alcohol and drug abuse.

These diseases used to be prevalent mostly in higher income brackets but not anymore; they are wreaking havoc amongst all South Africans. The good news is that the damage resulting from unhealthy lifestyles can be stemmed.

Dr Morgan Mkhathshwa, head of Operations at Bonitas Medical Fund talks about the top five lifestyle diseases and the effect they have on our bodies.

1. Lack of exercise

Not having enough exercise is a major cause of NCDs and chronic disease. Exercise can help reduce or prevent certain NCDs and chronic diseases.

- Regular aerobic exercise may delay or prevent type 2 diabetes and has benefits for type 1 diabetes as well. Resistance training for type 2 diabetes results in a leaner body mass, blood sugar and blood pressure control.
- Heart disease – exercise reduces cardiovascular risk factors including increasing HDL (good cholesterol) while offsetting LDL (bad) cholesterol and reducing blood pressure.
- Cancer – regular exercise can reduce the risk of several cancers including breast, colorectal, endometrial, kidney, liver, ovarian, pancreatic, prostate, gastric and oesophageal cancer.

2. Stress

Your stress response is controlled by your hypothalamus, a tiny control tower in your brain. Stress hormones are sent out,

which trigger your body's fight or flight response. Your heart may start beating faster, you breathe more quickly, and your muscles tense ready for action. All good in an emergency, but if it keeps firing all day it could put your health at serious risk.

Stress that's left unchecked can contribute to many health problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

3. Smoking

Thousands of people die every year from cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart attacks and strokes because of cigarette smoking. That's the bad news. The good news is that it's never too late to quit. Within 12 hours after your last cigarette your body will begin to heal itself. The levels of carbon monoxide and nicotine in your system will decline rapidly and your heart and lungs will begin repairing the damage caused by cigarette smoke.

Your risk of lung cancer starts to decline a year after you quit and, by the time you've been a non-smoker for 10 or 15 years, your risk of cancer is about the same as for people who have never smoked.

4. Alcohol

Over time, excessive alcohol consumption can lead to the development of chronic diseases and other serious problems including high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, liver disease, digestive problems, cancer of the breast, mouth, throat, oesophagus, voice box, liver, colon and rectum.

Alcohol affects the body in a multitude of ways, including:

- The pancreas. causing pancreatitis – alcohol-related liver disease and chronic liver inflammation, which result in either low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia), too much sugar in the blood (hyperglycaemia), and may end up in complications related to diabetes.
- Your central nervous system – over time it affects your memory, ability to make rational choices and think clearly. Chronic heavy drinking can cause permanent brain damage.
- Your digestive system – over time, the tissues in your digestive tract get damaged and you can't absorb nutrients properly, this results in malnutrition.
- Circulatory system – chronic drinking can affect your heart and lungs, giving rise to complications like high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat leading to heart attack, and stroke and heart failure.
- Skeletal and muscle systems – alcohol can affect bone density and increase your risk of fractures as well as muscle weakness and atrophy.
- Immune system – drinking heavily reduces your body's natural immune system which makes you more likely to develop pneumonia and tuberculosis.

5. Poor nutrition

Poor eating habits include under- or over-eating, not having enough of the healthy foods we need each day, or consuming too many types of food and drink. Unhealthy eating habits can affect our nutrient intake, including energy (kilojoules) protein, carbohydrates, essential fatty acids, vitamins and minerals as well as fibre and fluid.

This can cause obesity, which the World Health Organisation (WHO), says has reached epidemic proportions globally; diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, osteoporosis and cancer. All forms of malnutrition have become one of the biggest health problems globally.

By modifying your behaviour and adopting a healthier lifestyle, damage can be curbed, and you can improve both the quality of your life and your longevity.

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