High rates of diabetes and hypertension found in India

Rates of diabetes and hypertension are high among middle-aged and elderly people across all geographic measures and sociodemographic groups in India. This is the result of the first nationally representative study of those conditions in the country, presented by an international team of researchers from Harvard University, the University of Göttingen and the Heidelberg University Hospital. The researchers also found unexpectedly high rates of hypertension among young adults. The study was published in JAMA Internal Medicine.

The researchers wanted to find out how the prevalence of diabetes and hypertension in India varied by state, rural vs. urban location, and by sociodemographic characteristics such as education and household wealth. They used health data collected from roughly 1.3 million adults across India between 2012 and 2014, which included plasma glucose and blood pressure measurements.

The findings show that diabetes and hypertension are prevalent across all geographies and sociodemographic groups. Overall, prevalence of diabetes is 6.1 percent among women and 6.5 percent among men, for hypertension 20 percent among women and 24.5 percent among men. Rates of both diabetes and hypertension vary widely among states. Furthermore, household wealth and urban location appear to be positively associated with both conditions. Hypertension is higher among adults under 45 than previously estimated: The rates are higher than in Central and Eastern Europe, the region previously estimated to have the highest rates for young adults.

“The prevalence of diabetes and hypertension in India is much higher than commonly believed,” says Sebastian Vollmer, Professor of Development Economics and Director of the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS) at Göttingen University. “These so-called lifestyle diseases are becoming more and more problematic, not only in the Western world, but also in India. Unfortunately, the health care systems are not yet prepared to face the new situation.”

“Understanding how diabetes and hypertension prevalence varies within a country as large as India is essential for targeting of prevention, screening and treatment services,” says lead author Pascal Geldsetzer, doctoral student at
Harvard University. Till Bärnighausen, Humboldt Professor and Director of the Institute for Public Health at Heidelberg University Hospital, adds: “Major investment is needed if India is to avert catastrophic health, social and economic consequences from these conditions.”

India is home to more than a sixth of the world’s population. The country is in the midst of a rapid epidemiological transition: Rates of noncommunicable diseases have risen in recent decades and are likely to continue as India’s population ages and urbanizes. Meanwhile, many areas of India still face substantial burdens of infectious diseases and poor maternal and child health.


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