



Car Free Day Physical Activity on 1st March 2020, Photo by New Times

Non – Communicable Disease risks and Benefits of Physical Activity: A need for Community Awareness in Rwanda

The increasing burden of NCDs

The burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among populations in low- and middle-income countries is increasing¹. Hypertension and diabetes have the highest illness and death rates amongst the NCDs². In Rwanda 18% of the population has been diagnosed with hypertension³. The four major risk factors for the disease include; physical inactivity, tobacco smoking, unhealthy diets and use of excessive alcohol. Fortunately, to some extent these risks can be prevented and thus mitigate the disease burden.

Is the limited awareness of communities on the risks of NCDs and benefits of physical activity, hindering the uptake of physical activity?

The 2015 STEPs survey conducted by the Rwanda Biomedical Centre and the Ministry of Health indicates that risk factors for NCDs such as Physical inactivity was high at around 16% in general (Rwanda MoH/RBC, 2015). Studies have shown beneficial effects of population-level interventions to address these modifiable risk factors for hypertension and diabetes³.

In 2019, researchers from UR/CEBHA+ sought to identify existing population level interventions and the extent of their implementation. The study found that Rwanda has instituted various policies and programs as well as provided supportive environments to assist with reducing NCDs. Opportunities for physical activity to mitigate the risk factors for NCDs among the populations were also created. However, there is a limited uptake of the physical activity by the community due to limited awareness about the risks of NCDs and benefits of physical activity in prevention of NCDs.

If nothing is done, the burden of NCDs will continue to increase while the government is losing people and investing many resources in implementing the Physical activity interventions.

Rwanda Biomedical Centre should in the next 5 years:

1 Educate community on the risks of NCDs through various programs

2 Sensitize the community (at Village, Cell and Sector, levels) on the benefits of Physical activity in mitigating the risks of NCDs

3 Organize specific campaigns through big gatherings such as churches, youth camps, and others, to do physical activity



Kigali, Car Free Day Physical Activity on 1st March 2020, Photo by New Times

Implications

Research evidence shows that physical activity is one of main “saviours” of people from risks of burden of NCDs. The education of the community on the risks for NCDs and benefits of doing physical activity, through existing programs such as Umuganda, is cheaper and feasible, and increases chances of participation in the activities. The increased participation in Physical activity will save people’s lives from expensive costs related to healthcare for NCDs and its complications.

However, people tend to be resistant to change and it may require investment of time and resources to sensitise them for behaviour change towards participating in Physical activities. If all suggested above is done the following implications are expected;

- ❖ Increased participation in physical activity and thus improved protection from NCDs and its complications
- ❖ Reduced healthcare related costs
- ❖ Increased time and resources required to change the behavior of the community towards participation into physical activity.
- ❖ Increased knowledge on the risks of NCDs and benefits of the physical activity participation as a major mitigation of the risks,
- ❖ The country is likely to lose more lives of people and incur increased expenses if the above-recommended interventions are not done

“Before I knew that having overweight was a sign of welfare but after being educated I am now convinced and I know what I am going to do to protect my life”

“Information is not well reaching the community; there is need for general awareness so everyone knows what are these interventions and its health benefits on own life”

“Major interventions like physical activities are done mostly in the cities, what can be done is to decentralize these activities to community level so the community health workers can be able to sensitize the community during community works, meetings and other common activities in the community”

Quotes
from
qualitative
interviews

Key Findings

1 The general population has limited knowledge about the risks of NCDs and benefits of the physical activity interventions

2 Communities were sub optimally involved in the design and implementation of the chosen interventions

3 Limited follow up of implementation of physical activity at community level by implementing institutions

4 Low or non-use of the available supporting environment for physical by the community due lack of knowledge on the benefits