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How Saudi Arabia is getting healthier





For years, the health of the people of Saudi Arabia has been at risk. The rise of urbanization, as well as diets that include more processed food, has led to less active lifestyles and poor food choices. That, in turn, drove up rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension and more.

This trend is ready to be reversed. Robust government initiatives and new technologies are combining to increase the health outcomes for people in the Kingdom across many of the high-risk disease states.

Addressing obesity with exercise programs and technology

Obesity has been a growing epidemic in Saudi Arabia for years. According to the World Health Organization, 33.7% of the total population are obese, and another 68.2% are overweight¹. Being overweight or obese negatively impacts almost every aspect of a person's health by directly contributing to other significant health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and others. Obesity also puts individuals at greater risk of serious illnesses or death from COVID-19².

One key factor in the rise of obesity is a lack of physical activity. In the Kingdom, less than 20% of the population meet international physical activity guidelines³. To address this as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 programs, the government has launched the Quality of Life Program⁴ that is aimed at reducing obesity rates by increasing participation in sports and athletic activities.



In addition to government initiatives, healthcare provider intervention and the use of technology can support efforts to cut obesity rates. For example, healthcare providers can weigh patients at each visit and offer early lifestyle interventions if their weight is increasing⁵.

Popular technology, like wearables, can motivate users to begin and maintain healthier lifestyles. In fact, studies have found that using a wearable with body-sensing features, like heart rate monitors, during a workout can boost workout efficiency by as much as 20%⁶.

1- https://www.who.int/diabetes/country-profiles/sau_en.pdf

2- <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1709946/world>

3- <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/obesity-and-covid-19-renewed-call-address-growing-crisis>

4- <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/programs/QoL>

5- <https://www.healio.com/news/primary-care/20210302/diagnosis-discussion-and-direction-key-to-effective-obesity-care#>

6- <https://www.alj.com/en/perspective/investing-in-health-tech-and-digitizing-healthcare/>

Education to reverse the diabetes trend

A shift towards processed foods and beverages that are high in sugar combined with less physical activity has contributed to a rise in diabetes in Saudi Arabia. According to the International Diabetes Foundation (IDF), the prevalence of diabetes in adults in the Kingdom is currently 18.3%⁷.

The IDF also ranked the Kingdom as the seventh-highest country for new cases of Type 1 diabetes per year. The WHO says Saudi Arabia has the second-highest rate of diabetes in the Middle East — and 7th in the world⁸. Like obesity, diabetes increases the risk of other diseases, with a recent study showing that more than 52% of patients with type 2 diabetes die of cardiovascular causes⁹.



The government has set a goal to have a zero percent rise in deaths due to diabetes by 2025 and to reduce diabetes cases overall by 10% by 2030. To do so, they have launched diabetes awareness programs and active promotions of public awareness of the disease, which encourages healthcare providers to offer continued screening and early intervention efforts, such as lifestyle changes and nutrition clinics.

Another part of the government's approach to combat diabetes is to motivate personal responsibility. These efforts include implementing front-of-pack food labelling and wide-ranging fitness initiatives. Saudi Arabia has also become one of the first countries in the region to add a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages to encourage individuals to cut back.

As Saudi Arabia's trusted and sole provider of Novo Nordisk's insulin pens, we know how critical technology is to manage and live with diabetes. While those with diabetes work to improve their diet, increase exercise and reduce their weight, tech-enabled devices like insulin pens make injections easy, convenient and less intrusive than syringes. The pens are durable, lightweight devices that deliver accurate doses with low force injections and offer memory features to ensure correct use every time — which, ultimately, means healthier patients.

7- <https://idf.org/our-network/regions-members/middle-east-and-north-africa/members/46-saudi-arabia.html>

8- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26813972/>

9- <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1481756/saudi-arabia>

Manage hypertension with healthy eating and mobile apps

Aside from obesity and diabetes, hypertension is quietly becoming a health concern for increasing numbers of the Saudi population. A recent study found that 15.2% of adults were hypertensive, and 40.6% of them are borderline¹⁰. Perhaps the most worrisome finding of the study is that 57.8% of hypertensive people are undiagnosed.



The Ministry of Health recently launched a National Day for Walking¹¹ to promote public health, spread the culture of walking, increase the number of participants and help more than 500,000 people suffering from chronic diseases like hypertension. The government is using technology to drive engagement by asking people to register via their app.

Technology is a promising path to managing the rise of hypertension. A recent study from King Saud University found that mobile device apps could help large numbers of people self-manage their hypertension¹². More advanced technologies, like using artificial intelligence in tele-ophthalmology, are emerging as tools to diagnose hypertension earlier and faster¹³.

¹⁰- <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/ijhy/2014564679//>

¹¹- <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1820626/saudi-arabia>

¹²- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7902196/>

¹³- <https://investorintel.com/markets/biotech-healthcare/biotech-intel/expanding-globally-in-the-ai-image-based-diagnosis-sector-diagnos-is-actively-commercializing-their-cara-technology/>

Smoking is on the rise, but taxes and support programs are effective



Smoking is another critical factor that is affecting the health of the population. About 22.6% of adults in the Kingdom smoke¹⁴. In fact, some studies show that smoking was higher among males, those aged 25-44 years old, and those who live in the northern regions¹⁵.

Smoking is a well-known risk factor for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). While between 2.4% to 4.2% of adults have COPD, this number is expected to increase due to the popularity of smoking amongst younger generations¹⁶.

The government is aggressively tackling this problem with a wide-ranging strategic plan to reduce smoking rates to 5% by 2030¹⁷.

As a result of the plan, Saudi Arabia became the first country in the region to require plain packaging for tobacco products. Saudi has increased the minimum price of tobacco products and added electronic surveillance systems to monitor discount sales or promotions in physical stores and on websites. Recently, the Kingdom has added more products under its 100% tax on tobacco¹⁸, which studies have found is working to reduce smoking habits among the population¹⁹.

To support individuals on their journey to quitting smoking, the government expanded specialized clinics to 900 locations across the Kingdom. The government also launched a mobile app with services to support smoking prevention and treatment.

These efforts have already resulted in a rise of individuals in the Kingdom quitting smoking by 307%.

¹⁴- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19617999/>

¹⁵- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329619805_The_Prevalence_of_Cigarette_Smoking_in_Saudi_Arabia_in_2018

¹⁶- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6073786/>

¹⁷- <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/saudi-ministry-of-health-raising-efforts-on-tobacco-control-300942181.html>

¹⁸- <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-economy-tax/saudi-arabia-to-tax-e-cigarettes-and-more-soft-drinks-idUSKCN1SP0F0>

¹⁹- <http://www.emro.who.int/emhj-volume-262020-/volume-26-issue-1/smoking-behaviour-after-enforcement-of-a-100-tax-on-tobacco-products-in-saudi-arabia-a-cross-sectional-study.html>

The future of Saudi Arabia's health is digital

As government programs continue to drive better health outcomes, more is on the way.

In the summer of 2020, The Riyadh Declaration on Digital Health was launched during the Riyadh Global Digital Health Summit, a forum that championed the value of digital technology, data, and innovation for overall population health and healthcare systems²⁰. The key priorities are adopting health intelligence, interoperable digital technology, artificial intelligence (AI), effective communication, data governance, data quality and innovation in the healthcare sector.

While the Declaration was born to address future epidemics, it will improve health outcomes for the Kingdom.

To continue to drive the priorities of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the government is transforming the healthcare sector by enhancing the role of private organizations to drive economic diversification and innovation.

One top priority is AI for healthcare. The King Abdulaziz University and The University of Oxford established an AI center for healthcare to bring together research where specialists focused on developing treatments for rare, metabolic, and cardiac diseases. The first program will focus on AI-guided drug discovery for rare and cardio-metabolic diseases²¹.

Additionally, The Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA) partnered with Royal Philips to make top AI tech available to Saudi Arabia's data scientists and healthcare professionals in order for them to develop more advanced healthcare treatments²².

Despite some worrisome trends about the health of the population, it is clear the ambitious Vision 2030 programs are already driving a positive impact on people's lives. The digital transformation of the healthcare system driven by the Vision 2030 initiatives — including innovative technology like wearables, treatment devices, and AI — means Saudi Arabia can look to the future of its health with optimism and confidence.

²⁰- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19617999/>

²¹- <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/202001--10-new-partnership-king-abdulaziz-university-aims-revolutionise-drug-discovery-using>

²²- <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/emea/saudi-partners-philips-part-country-s-mission-become-leader-ai-healthcare>



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