



# SELF-CARE AS A LEVER FOR INCREASING HEALTH SYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY

*Pursuing an International Policy Framework on Self-Care*

---

Policy Brief

Updated: Jan 2023



## Introduction

Embedding self-care practices into the health care continuum has the potential to improve health and quality of life while simultaneously supporting health system sustainability. Self-care has existed for ages; however, the pursuit of efficiency in overstretched health systems due to the rise of chronic conditions, aging, and the impact of the recent pandemic, combined with a

sharp focus by the World Health Organization on Universal Health Coverage, offer an opportunity to reconfigure the value of self-care as a legitimate tool to strengthen overall health system response.

### Defining Self-Care

#### World Health Organization Definition:

The ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health-care provider.

Self-care refers to the holistic activities, practices, and products—both medicinal, devices, and nutritive—that a person can adopt to improve their health and well-being. In particular, self-care involves:

- Making healthy lifestyle choices
- Avoiding unhealthy lifestyle habits
- Making responsible use of prescription and non-prescription medicines
- Self-recognition of symptoms
- Self-monitoring
- Self-management

Self-care practices empower individuals by providing them with the information and tools to make decisions about their own health and care. An increased ownership for the own health promotes, at systems level, the efficient use of limited healthcare resources.

For instance, self-care helps to avert unnecessary health facility visits by both improving disease prevention efforts and by empowering individuals to address minor ailments at home.

In the pursuit of UHC, self-care interventions for every country and economic setting represent a viable solution to not only promote health, but also timely serve needy vulnerable populations.

A growing body of evidence shows the promise of self-care. Through self-care practices, patients save time that would otherwise be spent traveling to the health facility and meeting with a clinician, and health care providers are freed up to treat patients

with more severe health conditions.

As health systems around the world grapple with rising costs and health worker shortages, self-care offers a promising path forward for achieving universal health coverage and ensuring health and well-being for all.

In Europe alone, every General Practitioner would need to work an extra 2.4 hours per day in the absence of self-care products.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, if more self-care was practiced, every General



Practitioner could gain more than one hour in a day, or 58,000 General Practitioners could be freed. A recent study<sup>ii</sup> noted that self-care relieves the burden on healthcare providers by saving 1.8 billion physician hours, allowing them to attend to more severe health conditions.

Self-care saves money for the health system by preventing unnecessary patient interactions and saves individuals money by decreasing out-of-pocket expenditures for clinician visits and reducing time spent on care-seeking. For example, in Brazil, it is estimated that USD 601 million could be saved annually by avoiding unnecessary physician visits for minor ailments.<sup>iii</sup> At the global level, current self-care activities are generating substantial monetary savings as well as healthcare workforce savings, totaling at least approximately \$119 billion. This figure alone is very close to the GDP of countries like Kuwait, Morocco, or Hungary<sup>iv</sup>. These resources would otherwise have been spent on unnecessary medical expenses, including avoidable physician visits and prescription medicines for self-treatable conditions that could alternatively be managed with OTC products.

In addition to cost-containment savings, we should also take into account the added gains in overall productivity and quality of life:

- Approximately 40.8 billion productive days are achieved through the use of over-the-counter products, corresponding to a value of \$1,879 billion in welfare effects. These numbers include benefits of OTC only, they are much bigger if other interventions were included such as prevention measures and vitamin and mineral supplements;
- Due to, for example, reduced impairment and improved health statuses identified in this study, a gain of approximately 22 million QALYs is estimated worldwide.<sup>v</sup>

A confluence of factors has come together to position self-care as an emerging invaluable piece of the health care continuum.

- First, we have a better understanding than ever before of the centrality of individual behavior to the successful prevention and management of disease. Indeed, the Political declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) identifies both healthy behaviors and patient empowerment as critical to the management of NCDs.<sup>vi</sup>
- Second, the World Health Organisation increasingly foregrounds the importance of person-centred health care across all disease areas, with a related emphasis on health literacy and empowerment. WHO's recently issued Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health and Well-Being<sup>vii</sup> confirms the trend towards formalizing self-care as a piece of the care continuum.



- Third, digital tools have unlocked access to health information and services for people, globally, although there is still work to be done on improving digital health rights for underserved communities in the Global South.<sup>viii</sup>

There are more proven self-care products and practices available to populations today than ever before, and it is within our collective power to unleash the benefits of truly self-care enabled health systems around the world, if only we set up adequate policy frameworks that embed self-care seamlessly into the care continuum. Self-care belongs to individuals, families, communities, health care professionals, and policymakers at different levels and with different responsibilities. However, it is a primary responsibility of policymaker to design the enabling environment for each of the stakeholders to fulfill these responsibilities.

Projected to the future, the cost saving effect is estimated to be approximately \$178.8 billion per annum. Furthermore, gains in productivity of 71.9 billion productive days per annum and around \$2,830 billion per annum in welfare effects result.<sup>ix</sup>

Beyond the pursuit of UHC, self-care has the potential to advance a diverse set of health and development priorities. For example, self-care is critical to healthy ageing, as related to resolution WHA69.3 on the global strategy and action plan on ageing and health and resolution WHA72.2 on primary health care and WHA74.5 on oral health. Additionally, self-care contributes to several of the goals included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; in particular, Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages), and acknowledging the close links between self-care and several other Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 1 (End poverty in all its forms and everywhere), Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), Goal 10 (Reduce inequality in and among countries), Goal 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable), and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).<sup>x</sup> Within this framework, a deeper international focus on self-care, possibly brought up by a WHO Resolution on Self-Care will help foster the necessary momentum to fully integrate it into health systems for the benefit of individuals and society.

#### **The Four Enablers of Self-Care:**

*Stakeholder Support and Adoption:* Support among a wide range of stakeholders—patients, consumers, health workers, regulators, and policymakers -- is essential to maximizing the adoption and value of self-care products and behaviors.

*Consumer & Patient Empowerment:* Self-care products and practices deliver the greatest value when consumers and patients are empowered to understand their health, make their own health decisions, and use self-care products confidently.

*Self-Care Health Policy:* Health policy plays a critical role in the adoption of self-care products and is influenced by policymakers' perceptions and decisions related to self-care, including recognition of self-care products' and practices' economic value, and policies to promote self-care as an affordable health solution.

*Regulatory:* Regulations determine the ability of the self-care industry to drive innovation, empower consumers, and realize the value of its medicinal, non-medicinal, nutritive, and device products for the health system.



Such a framework ought to include some of following key elements:

- Defines self-care and outlines its value to national health systems, governments, and to the people-centered care framework;
- Facilitates Member States' development and effective implementation of national self-care strategies, guidelines or plans that address the core enablers of self-care practices;
- Provides direction to Member States on aligning resources, investments, and new and existing policies of relevance in service of a single, harmonized national strategy on self-care.

This framework, possibly a WHO resolution, would call on Member States, taking into account their national circumstances, to:

- Enhance public health literacy and education, and implement public awareness campaigns on self-care interventions for health and well-being;
- Adopt, integrate and scale digital health tools for self-care into national health and social care systems;
- Build health and social care professionals' capacity on self-care, by including self-care practices in training modules for health workers and implementing national guidelines that incorporate self-care into healthcare prevention and treatment plans, with a particular focus on community-based primary care;
- Recognize self-care as a critical, cross-cutting component of the care continuum, a core component of people-centered care, and an enabler of universal health coverage;
- Invest in policies that promote self-care practices as a means of reducing health care expenditures and addressing gaps in the health and social care workforce.

---

<sup>i</sup> Forthcoming study from AEGSP

<sup>ii</sup> The Global Social and Economic Value of Self-Care, Bauer C., May U., Pham T.-K., Giulini-Limbach C., Schneider-Ziebe A.

<sup>iii</sup> [The Power of Self-Care in Achieving Health-for-All \(assets.kpmg\)](#)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>

<sup>v v</sup> The Global Social and Economic Value of Self-Care, Bauer C., May U., Pham T.-K., Giulini-Limbach C., Schneider-Ziebe A.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/710899/?ln=en>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240030909>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/299380?ln=en>

<sup>ix ix</sup> The Global Social and Economic Value of Self-Care, Bauer C., May U., Pham T.-K., Giulini-Limbach C., Schneider-Ziebe A.

<sup>x</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>