



# *Self-Care* **READINESS INDEX**

## **2025**

Scaling Self-Care for Health System Sustainability, NCD Prevention and Management, and Healthy Ageing

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## Empowering health systems through self-care

### A policy imperative

Self-care is the foundation of functioning and sustainable health systems – absent a population that is adequately educated, equipped, and empowered to adopt self-care practices, health systems will continue to struggle with healthcare worker shortages, facility overcrowding, and mounting costs related to population ageing and rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

For policymakers seeking to improve health outcomes while managing limited resources, self-care presents a critical policy opportunity with demonstrable returns on investment and the potential to address multiple policy priorities simultaneously, from universal health coverage to healthy aging initiatives and the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases.

## The link between self-care, NCDs, and healthy ageing

Self-care, as defined in this report, refers to a broad range of activities, practices, and products that individuals can adopt to improve their health and well-being.

Self-care involves making healthy lifestyle choices and avoiding unhealthy habits; making responsible use of prescription and nonprescription medicines; recognizing symptoms of common illnesses and diseases; managing one's own treatment of colds, coughs, and other self-treatable conditions; and self-monitoring, self-testing, and self-managing health conditions. Self-care products may include nonprescription medicines, dietary supplements, vitamins, and simple medical devices or tests designed for home use.

**Crucially, self-care practices can help to prevent individuals from developing NCDs, and can help individuals who live with NCDs to better manage their conditions and prevent them from advancing. Self-care is also a critical component of healthy ageing.**

At a time when people do not report longing for longer lifespans, but longing for more healthy, active, life-years,<sup>1</sup> the promotion of self-care is a powerful but still underutilized tool for health systems and policymakers.



Effectively and equitably combatting NCDs may be the most consequential health challenge of our lifetime, as NCDs currently cause 76% of global deaths, and their burden has steadily grown at around 1% year-over-year for the past thirty years.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, 18 million people died from an NCD before age 70 years, with the overwhelming majority of these premature deaths occurring in LMICs.<sup>3</sup> NCDs also place a heavy economic burden on countries, decreasing productivity while simultaneously contributing to heavy costs on health systems.



While health systems and global health policymakers originally turned to self-care as a tool for enhancing sexual and reproductive health, self-care is also the cornerstone of effective NCD prevention and control. The scope of self-care in NCDs includes:

1 RISK REDUCTION

- a. Health promotion
- b. Healthy lifestyle
- c. Vitamins, minerals and supplements



2 NCD PREVENTION AND CONTROL

- a. Managing self-treatable conditions
- b. Access to over-the-counter medicines
- c. Giving care to dependent people



3 MANAGEMENT OF NCDS

- a. Seeking hospital, specialist, or primary care when needed
- b. Rehabilitation, including palliative care



Many countries are already leveraging self-care interventions to unlock health system capacity and address the growing burden of NCDs. Scaling these approaches could significantly improve health outcomes while delivering economic gains of over \$230 billion in low and middle income countries (LMICs) by 2030.

**Self-care practices have the potential to relieve the pressure that NCDs place on health systems, while simultaneously allowing productivity gains.**

When over-the-counter treatment is adopted as a first-line response, it generates a global productivity return of 40.8 billion productive days,<sup>4</sup> and these are productive days related to OTC treatment, alone – the gains could be exponentially realized when coupled with self-care practices for NCD prevention.

**Self-care also has the potential to help individuals remain active and achieve healthy ageing.**

By 2030, over 1 billion people will be age 65 or older, and most will require most health systems resources as they age due to diseases associated with ageing.<sup>5</sup> Self-care practices and products are relevant across all diseases of ageing, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, osteoporosis, dementia, stroke, and hearing loss. And, the adoption of self-care behaviors can help individuals maintain dignity, self-esteem, and autonomy as they age by empowering them to take charge of their own health. Self-care to support healthy ageing includes medications-management, adopting healthy behaviors, preventing infectious diseases, preventing and managing chronic diseases, and promoting sexual health and intimacy.



## Today's self-care landscape

Globally, recognition of the importance of self-care is growing, and governments are increasingly incorporating self-care strategies into national health plans around things like NCD prevention and control<sup>1</sup>.

Today, despite being underutilized, self-care already delivers \$119 billion in global financial savings per year, and frees up 1.8 billion physician hours.<sup>6</sup> Best practices in self-care exist in almost every health discipline, from dentistry - for example, Ireland has empowered dentists to provide smoking cessation advice - to mental health, as in Zimbabwe where trained community volunteers deliver structured therapy via 45-minute sessions on a park bench.<sup>7</sup> Further, advances in digital health have been transformative for the self-care space.

**Digital health tools can help to support mental health and well-being, can support medications-management and activity tracking, and represent a new avenue for delivering health literacy materials.**



**\$119 billion**  
saved annually  
through self-care



**1.8 billion**  
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## Bridging the gap

### Scaling self-care for greater impact

Despite these bright spots, progress on formally integrating self-care tactics (and calling them by name) within global and national health strategies has been uneven, particularly in the area of NCDs.

Fully realizing the potential of self-care to prevent and control NCDs and support healthy ageing will be contingent on scaling self-care practices and fully leveraging the support of multidisciplinary care professionals, alongside new supportive digital health technologies.



# Four recommendations for scaling self-care practices to combat NCDs and support healthy ageing



1

## FORMALLY INTEGRATE SELF-CARE INTO NATIONAL HEALTH PLANS AND STRATEGIES

Self-care should be understood as a core strategy for reducing the global burden of NCDs, and also as a critical pillar in supporting universal health coverage, the attainment of the SDGs, and the support of healthy ageing. As such, self-care strategies should be explicitly incorporated into national health plans and strategies, especially as they related to chronic conditions and healthy ageing.



2

## MOBILIZE THE ENTIRE MULTIDISCIPLINARY CARE TEAM IN SERVICE OF SELF-CARE

All members of the care team, across the entirety of the health system continuum, have a role to play in expanding access to self-care products and practices and encouraging their use. Too often, educational or advocacy efforts related to self-care focus on the role of physicians in promoting self-care to their individuals. However, physicians, pharmacists, dentists, nurses, and community health workers all have unique roles to play in encouraging the uptake of self-care behaviors. For example, pharmacists provide critical hands-on education on using medical devices – which is a key piece of supporting individuals in undertaking self-care as part of their daily routine.



3

## LEVERAGE DIGITAL HEALTH TECHNOLOGIES TO INCREASE ACCESS TO SELF-CARE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Advances in digital health technologies, sometimes powered by artificial intelligence, have enabled individuals to better manage and understand their own health. Digital health technologies that are safe, affordable, well-integrated digital health technologies have the potential to expand the reach of self-care to millions of people, particularly in LMICs and in those areas where access to healthcare providers is limited.



4

## PROMOTE SELF-CARE AS A KEY PIECE OF HEALTHY AGEING

Self-care should be embedded in global, national, and community strategies for promoting healthy and active ageing. Further, advocates and healthcare providers who work with older adults should be equipped to provide guidance on self-care to support healthy ageing, particularly in the areas of NCD prevention and management, infection prevention, healthy diet and exercise, and sexual health.



# The status of self-care in selected geographies

## Brazil

Brazil is a large and diverse country, and self-care practices vary substantially by geography, income-level, and cultural background, but generally take the form of self-medication with OTC or traditional medicines.<sup>8</sup>

**Additionally, the country places a universal heavy emphasis on health literacy, with programmatic investments in the area reflective of its prioritization within Brazilian health policymaking.**<sup>9</sup> The concept of self-care in Brazil – and indeed in much of the region – is closely linked to issues regarding the sustainability of healthcare systems, which stem both from healthcare costs related to the growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and to expanding populations.

**Brazil has prioritized health education in recognition that many of its sustainability challenges related to rising rates of NCDs could be tackled with self-care and improved health literacy.**

According the GSCF 2022 Global Social & Economic Value of Self-Care study, Brazil is among the countries in the region that gain the most from practicing self-care. Per the report's methodology, self-care practices in countries like Brazil currently save over 800 million hours for individuals, and result in a gain of well over two billion productive days. In Brazil, specifically, self-medication rates range from 16.1% (the last large-survey issued in 2015)<sup>10</sup> to 69% (a sample of individuals interviewed after the COVID-19 pandemic),<sup>11</sup> with OTC products accounting for over 25% of medicine sales.<sup>12</sup>



**800 million**  
hours for individuals  
saved annually



**Over 2 billion**  
productive days gained



OTC drug use saves  
Brazil's public system  
**R\$364 million**  
annually



**Studies confirm significant cost savings for the public health system through responsible use of OTC medications.**

For every \$1 spent on OTC drugs, Brazil's public system saves \$7, with net annual savings estimated at R\$364 million (about US\$117 million).<sup>13 14</sup>

Self-care is mentioned in many health policy documents in Brazil. For example, Brazil's Strategic Action Plan to Tackle Noncommunicable Diseases (2011-2022) mentions the importance of self-care and the rational use of medication for healthy aging, for the good management of cardiovascular diseases, and the importance of self-management for NCDs in general.<sup>15</sup> Brazil's National Policy on Integrative and Complementary Practices (Portuguese acronym: PNPIC) mentions self-care as a way to improve disease management and health promotion at the individual level and calls for healthcare providers to stimulate individuals' self-care and autonomy in disease management.<sup>16</sup>

**Health education is a cornerstone element of the Brazilian government's health strategy.**<sup>17</sup>

The government's School Health Program (PSE), or Programa Saude na Escola, is an intersectoral initiative that focuses on promoting health and well-being within the school environment.<sup>18</sup> The program is a collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Health and has enjoyed remarkably high acceptance by Brazilian municipalities, as it was present in 97% of the Brazilian territory in 2022.<sup>19</sup>

**Self-care is an increasingly present and valued topic in health discussions in Brazil, including medical congresses aimed at family physicians, primary care, diabetes, and pharmacists.** The Ministry of Health, in partnership with Fiocruz and UNA-SUS, has recently launched multiple editions of the course "Autocuidado em saúde e a Literacia para a promoção da saúde e a prevenção de doenças crônicas na Atenção Primária à Saúde." This course is targeted at health professionals, particularly those working in Primary Health Care (PHC), and aims to develop strategies and interventions focused on promoting supported self-care among individuals, improving the quality of care for people with chronic non-communicable diseases.<sup>20 21 22 23</sup> Self-care and diabetes are often discussed at congresses and in professional development sessions. Recent studies and program reports confirm that educational interventions for self-care in diabetes are being implemented and evaluated, with evidence that they improve both knowledge and self-care practices among participants.<sup>24</sup> Research and educational sessions at Brazilian congresses frequently address the challenges and strategies for improving self-care among people with diabetes, including adherence to treatment, lifestyle modification, and psychosocial support.



**In 2023, the Declaration of São Paulo was adopted during the first Latin American Self-Care Congress, aiming to make self-care a cornerstone of public health policy across Latin America.** The declaration's seven pillars include promoting self-care for universal health coverage, supporting self-care education and awareness, leveraging digital health, strengthening collaboration and partnerships, ensuring equity and inclusivity, advocating for better self-care governance, and monitoring progress and accountability.<sup>25</sup>

## Ethiopia

Ethiopia has rapidly advanced its self-care agenda, especially in the context of sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, adolescent, and youth health and nutrition (RMNCAYH-N).

Stakeholder engagement is robust and multi-sectoral, involving the Ministry of Health (MoH), professional societies (notably the Ethiopian Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, ESOG), NGOs, international partners, and community health workers.<sup>23 24 25 26 27 28 29</sup>

The MoH has developed and piloted comprehensive national self-care guidelines (2023–2024), with input from technical working groups across program areas (safe motherhood, newborn and child survival, adolescent and youth health, family planning, nutrition).<sup>30</sup> These guidelines are being piloted in Oromia, Amhara, Somali, and Addis Ababa, with plans for scale-up.<sup>31 32</sup> Ethiopia’s Health Sector Transformation Plan II (HSTP II), National Reproductive Health Strategic Plan, National Adolescent and Youth Health Strategy, and NCDs Strategic Plan all recognize self-care as a strategic direction to ease the burden on the healthcare system and achieve universal health coverage (UHC).<sup>33 34 35 36 37 38</sup>

**The national guidelines and advocacy efforts emphasize empowering people to self-manage aspects of their health, reducing facility visits, and improving outcomes, particularly for chronic conditions and reproductive health.**<sup>39 40</sup>



**Social and behavior change communication (SBCC) is a core strategy, leveraging community outreach, digital tools, and health education to promote self-care practices.**<sup>41 42</sup>

Established in September 2023, the Ethiopia National Self-Care Network (NSN) supports the MoH in implementing and disseminating self-care guidelines, with ESOG as convener and PSI Ethiopia as secretary.<sup>43</sup> The government has registered key self-care commodities (e.g., DMPA-SC for self-injection, Combi pack for self-managed abortion) and is training community health workers to educate and support community self-care.<sup>44</sup> Ethiopia’s extensive network of health extension workers and community volunteers is central to promoting self-care, especially in rural and humanitarian settings. They provide health education, support self-testing (e.g., HIV, pregnancy), and facilitate access to self-care commodities.<sup>45 46 47 48</sup>

**In November 2024, Ethiopia hosted the landmark WHO Africa Regional Self-Care Summit in Addis Ababa, signaling high-level political commitment.** The summit brought together policymakers, UN agencies, civil society, and donors to accelerate self-care interventions, particularly for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).<sup>49</sup>

**Ethiopia is positioning itself as a regional frontrunner in self-care, backed by strong stakeholder engagement, supportive policies, and innovative implementation approaches.**

The government’s dedication is demonstrated through the development of national self-care guidelines, pilot programs across multiple regions, and the integration of self-care into key health strategies. Central to Ethiopia’s approach are community health workers, digital health innovations, and a focus on empowering women. While challenges remain, Ethiopia’s model—anchored in community engagement, technology, and policy alignment—offers a blueprint for leveraging self-care to advance universal health coverage and improve outcomes, particularly for underserved and crisis-affected populations.





# Thailand

Self-care is increasingly recognized and supported by stakeholders in Thailand, even if the term itself is not always familiar to the general public.

Thailand’s Healthy Lifestyle Strategic Plan Phase II and the 5-Year Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Plan (2017–2021) highlight self-care as a key strategy. The plans encourage people to self-screen, support self-care among NCD individuals, and focus on building the capacity of public health and family volunteers to manage NCDs in communities, with a strong emphasis on health literacy.<sup>50</sup>

**Healthcare professionals continue to play a vital role in educating individuals on disease prevention and managing simple ailments at home.**

Thailand’s Village Health Volunteer program, launched over 40 years ago and overseen by the Department of Health Service Support, was originally created to promote primary health care and support maternal and child health. Its scope has since expanded to include NCD prevention, cervical cancer screening, and broader community health promotion.<sup>51 52</sup>



**More recently, the Ministry of Health introduced a campaign to promote healthier lifestyles, focusing on reducing the consumption of salty, oily, and sugary foods while encouraging more physical activity-particularly targeting Thailand’s southern region, where these health challenges are more common.** As part of the initiative, prevention guidelines are being shared both on social media and within local communities, and support networks and patient groups are being strengthened.<sup>53</sup> These groups now work more closely with healthcare professionals and local health centers to advance education on prevention and self-care.<sup>54 55</sup> The Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, also continues to promote healthy behaviors among youth.<sup>56 57</sup> Research has demonstrated that self-care is a central topic of conversation between healthcare providers and their individuals.<sup>58</sup>

At the 2024 Joint Congress, the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) highlighted the crucial role of self-care, particularly for preventing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and stressed the value of integrating traditional medicine and digital health technologies to empower individuals in managing their health. The event underscored the government’s ongoing commitment to embedding self-care within public health systems and enhancing regional cooperation on these efforts.<sup>59</sup>

**In November 2024, Thailand hosted the pivotal Bangkok Joint Initiative on Self-Care Medical Products for Health and Well-Being, a collaborative event organized by the Global Self-Care Federation (GSCF), Asia-Pacific Self Medication Industry (APSMI), and the Thai Self Medication Industry Association (TSMIA).** This initiative convened stakeholders from government, industry, and NGOs across the Asia-Pacific region to champion self-care as a foundational element of Universal Health Coverage. The initiative’s priorities include:<sup>60</sup>

- Promoting self-care medical products to improve health literacy
- Leveraging technology and digital solutions
- Strengthening public-private collaboration
- Ensuring equity and inclusivity
- Advocating for improved self-care governance

The congress also highlighted the importance of integrating self-care into primary healthcare, addressing demographic shifts such as aging populations and the rise of non-communicable diseases, and aligning with global health goals and participatory approaches to health governance.



**Building skills in accessing and understanding health information, simplifying service systems, and integrating digital tools to empower self-reliance will continue easing the burden on the healthcare system.<sup>61</sup>**

**These case studies from Brazil, Ethiopia, and Thailand demonstrate that integrating self-care into national health strategies leads to improved health outcomes, greater health system efficiency, and enhanced community engagement.** While approaches differ based on context, the common thread is the critical role of health literacy, stakeholder collaboration, and innovation in scaling self-care for NCD prevention and healthy ageing.



## Conclusion

As health systems worldwide confront the mounting challenges of NCDs, ageing populations, resource constraints, and increasing demands for equitable access, self-care emerges as a vital and transformative solution. The evidence is unequivocal: self-care improves health outcomes, reduces healthcare costs, enhances individual autonomy, and bolsters system resilience. Yet despite its immense potential, self-care remains underutilized and inconsistently integrated into formal health strategies.

This report has underscored the multifaceted value of self-care—from improving the prevention and management of NCDs to promoting healthy ageing and empowering individuals across the life course. It has highlighted the considerable economic and social returns of self-care, and showcased leading examples from Brazil, Ethiopia, and Thailand that illustrate how supportive policy environments, health literacy, digital innovation, and cross-sector collaboration can successfully scale self-care practices.

The path forward demands deliberate and inclusive action. Fully realizing the promise of self-care will require a concerted effort to embed it into the very foundation of health systems—not as an ancillary initiative, but as a core strategy for sustainability, equity, and population well-being.





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GLOBAL  
**SELF-CARE**  
FEDERATION

The Global Self-Care Federation exists to create a healthier world through better self-care. We represent associations and manufacturers in the self-care industry, working closely with our members and relevant stakeholder groups to ensure evidence-based self-care products and solutions are recognized as key contributors to health for individuals and systems worldwide. Our work ensures key policy and decision-makers embrace self-care, recognize its values and use its broad range of benefits as the building blocks to deliver better and more sustainable health outcomes for all.

We represent the self-care and self-medication industry and endeavor to contribute to the World Health Organization's public health goals through our specialized expertise. GSCF is a non-State actor in official relations with WHO.

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