World Health Organization

# 3 April 2012 | Geneva –On World Health Day (7 April), the World Health Organization (WHO) is calling for urgent action to ensure that, at a time when the world's population is ageing rapidly, people reach old age in the best possible health.

In the next few years, for the first time, there will be more people in the world aged over 60 than children aged less than five. By 2050, 80% of the world's older people will be living in low- and middle-income countries.

The main health challenges for older people everywhere are noncommunicable diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic lung disease.

"People in low- and middle-income countries currently face up to four times the risk of death and disability from noncommunicable diseases than people in high-income countries," says Dr Margaret Chan WHO Director-General. "Yet most of these conditions are largely preventable or inexpensive to treat."

The risk of developing all noncommunicable diseases can be significantly reduced by adopting healthy behaviours, such as being physically active, eating a healthy diet, avoiding the harmful use of alcohol and not smoking or using tobacco products. The earlier people adopt these behaviours, the better their chance of enjoying a healthy old age.

"Healthy lifestyles from the very beginning of life is key to a healthy and active old age," says Dr John Beard, Director of the Department of Ageing and the Life-course at WHO.

WHO highlights the need for countries to take steps to prevent noncommunicable diseases, and to ensure that systems and services are in place to provide treatment and care when it is required. Many of these services are highly cost-effective. For example, high blood pressure – a key risk factor for both heart disease and stroke – can be effectively treated for just a few dollars a year. Today, less than 15% of older people in low- and middle-income countries in

need are receiving treatment for high blood pressure.

WHO has outlined four key actions that governments and societies can take now to strengthen healthy and active ageing:

- Promote good health and healthy behaviours at all ages to prevent or delay the development of chronic diseases
- Minimize the consequences of chronic disease through early detection and quality care (primary, long-term and palliative care)
- Create physical and social environments that foster the health and participation of older people
- 'Reinvent ageing' - changing social attitudes to build a society in which older people are respected and valued

Poor health is not the only concern people have as they grow older. Stigmatizing attitudes and common stereotypes often prevent older people from participating fully in society. Older people make important contributions as family members, volunteers and as active participants in the workforce and are a significant social and economic resource.

"When a 100-year-old man finishes a marathon, as happened last year, we have to rethink conventional definitions of what it means to be 'old'," says Dr Chan. "Past stereotypes developed in past centuries no longer hold."

World Health Day is celebrated on 7 April to mark the anniversary of the founding of the World Health Organization in 1948.