

# Healthy ageing: A priority for delivering universal health coverage

March 2023

People worldwide are living longer, but the opportunities that arise from increasing longevity depend strongly on the health and well-being of older populations. Healthy ageing needs to be fostered by creating integrated and responsive primary health care systems and services; ensuring access to long-term care for older people who need it; changing how we think, feel and act towards age and ageing; and cultivating age-friendly environments. If these actions are underpinned by activities to address socioeconomic inequities, then they can improve the health and well-being of current and future generations.

## Key messages

- **People worldwide are living longer.** Every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the number and proportion of people aged 60 years and older in the population. By 2030, persons aged 60 years and older are projected to globally outnumber youth and to be double the number of children under five. By 2050, 2.1 billion people will be aged 60 years and older, with 80% living in low- and middle-income countries.
- **People are not necessarily enjoying later life in good health and well-being.** Between 2000 and 2019, the gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy at age 60 increased from 4.1 to 4.7 years for men and from 5.3 to 6.0 years for women (1). Around 34% of people aged 60 years or more experience significant difficulties in functioning, with a slightly higher prevalence in women (36.6%) compared to men (32.0%).
- **The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the seriousness of existing gaps in policies and health and social systems.** Globally, 82% of the estimated 15 million excess deaths due to COVID-19 occurred in people aged 60 and older. Across the OECD countries, deaths in the long-term care sector accounted for 40% of all COVID-19 deaths (2). More than 50% of countries reported disruptions to essential services for older people during the pandemic.
- **All countries face major challenges to ensure universal health coverage is ready to respond to population ageing.** Although SDG indicator 3.8.1 (coverage of essential health services) has improved globally over the past 20 years, the proportion of people facing financial hardship (SDG indicator 3.8.2) due to out-of-pocket health spending has increased in that same time period. Poorest households – particularly those with older, dependent adults – experience the highest financial burden (3).
- **It is essential to put in place policies and services that promote health and provide person-centred integrated care and long-term care without causing financial hardship.**

## Background and challenges

Poor health can increase the need and cost of health and long-term care and can have catastrophic financial impacts on older people and their families. It also limits older people's social participation and contributions to society, and is a major cause of older people withdrawing from the workforce. It is therefore critical that healthy ageing is supported.

The 2019 Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage (A/RES/74/2) committed to fostering active and healthy ageing and leaving no one behind – including older people. The United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 (RES 75/131), which is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, marks a major contribution to delivering on this commitment (3). However, the 2020 Baseline report for the Decade of Healthy Ageing reviewed baseline status across a range of indicators and found that most countries are not on track to achieve the transformative change envisaged under the Decade (1).

The current disease-based curative approach to health care, together with the absence of interventions to prevent, slow or reverse declines in physical and mental capacities, have proven ineffective and insufficient in improving health and well-being in older age. For universal health coverage (UHC) to be truly universal, health systems need to meet diverse care needs through person-centred care, be integrated and coordinated with social care and avoid causing financial hardship.

## Key actions and policy recommendations

### Strengthen primary health care

Strengthen primary health care to provide integrated and person-centred care, including services that maintain the intrinsic capacity and functional ability of older people. This may include person-centred assessment and care plans, multimodal exercise, assistive products, palliative care and caregiving.

### Support long-term care

Strengthen approaches to long-term care within UHC to better integrate health and social care services in the community, provide decent working conditions and maintain an adequately trained health and care workforce. Provide education and support to informal carers, who are mostly women.

### Protect families from financial shocks

As part of designing and financing universal coverage for health and long-term care, develop sustainable financing mechanisms that can protect older people and their families from undue financial burdens.

## Tackle ageism and other social factors

Address key risk factors and the social determinants of poor health in older age, including ageism, poor literacy (both health and digital), social isolation and loneliness. This should be accompanied with efforts to tackle ageism within UHC through policies, laws, educational activities and intergenerational contact interventions to improve how we think, feel and act towards age and ageing (4).

## Act beyond health

Take actions beyond the health and social care sectors in areas such as labour, education, housing, social protection, transport and technology. Support the creation of age-friendly cities and communities by adapting services and built and social environments to be more inclusive and supportive of the needs of older people, including people with dementia and disabilities.

## Understand the links between UHC and ageing populations

The United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing offers a people-centred, whole-of-society approach to healthy ageing that focuses on underserved populations that ensures no one is left behind. However, guaranteeing universal coverage for health and long-term care for older people is still a distant ambition in many countries. More attention needs to be given to the links between UHC and population ageing if the goals of healthy ageing for all are to be achieved.

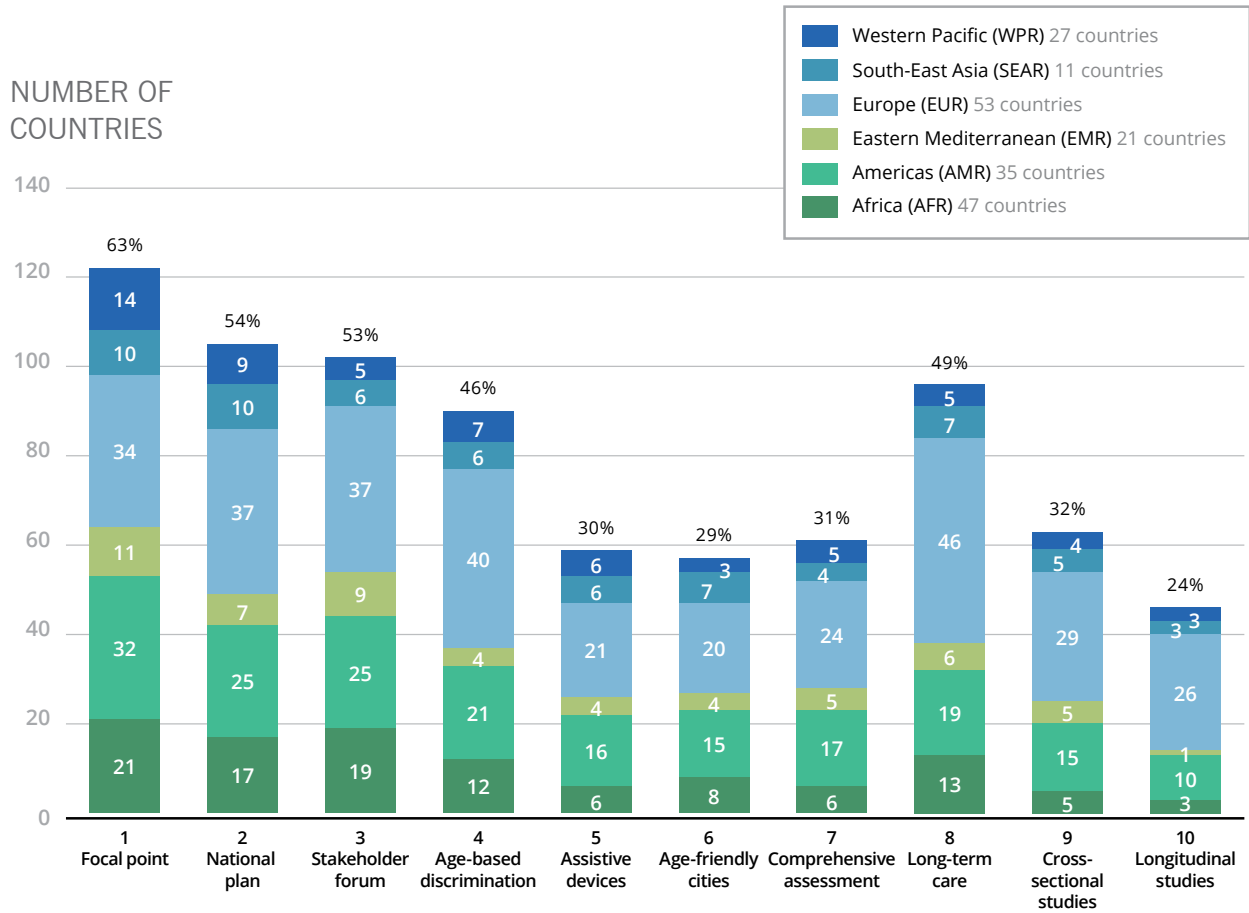
## References and resources

1. *Decade of Healthy Ageing: Baseline Report*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2020.
2. *Rising from the COVID 19 crisis: Policy responses in the long-term care sector*. Paris, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021.
3. *United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030)*. New York, United Nations General Assembly, 2020.
4. *Global report on ageism*. Geneva, World Health Organisation, 2021.
5. Eozenou EH, Neelsen S and Smits M-F. Financial Protection in Health among the Elderly – A Global Stocktake. *Health Systems & Reform*, 2021, 7(2). DOI: 10.1080/23288604.2021.1911067



# Figures

**Figure 1.** Number of countries responding “yes” to the 10 Decade process indicators in 2020 by region and percentage of 194 countries.



Source: Decade of Healthy Ageing: Baseline Report (1).

*For further information:  
[hsresilience@who.int](mailto:hsresilience@who.int)*

World Health Organization  
Avenue Appia 20  
1211 - Geneva 27



**World Health  
Organization**