

India is losing productivity worth billions due to cancers that can be prevented

The BRICS grouping of countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — are losing billions of dollars in productivity owing to cancer, says a research paper published in the Journal of Cancer Epidemiology. India recorded a total productivity loss of \$6.7 billion in 2012 because of cancer, representing 0.36% of our GDP. This is second only to South Africa which recorded a productivity loss of \$1.9 billion, or 0.49% of its GDP. While the cost per death of productivity lost in India was less than \$20,000, the lowest among BRICS countries, the highest productivity losses — \$0.74 billion — because of the lip and oral cancers are a cause for alarm. Beyond the impact on public health and loss of human life, the disease also imposes a steep economic cost on a country's economy. Taking the loss of productivity owing to premature death into consideration can provide policymakers additional perspective when they chart out strategies for prevention and control of the disease. Originally grouped together as rising emerging economies, the five BRICS countries today comprise more than 40% of the world's population and 25% of global GDP. The five economies collectively lost nearly \$46.3 billion in 2012 on account of cancer-related deaths that could have been prevented with proper treatment and adequate infrastructure, says the paper.

The costs and logistical difficulties in implementing screening and treatment programmes in the BRICS countries underscore the importance of cancer prevention. Doctors say close to 60% of cancers in India can be prevented. Around 40% cancers in the country (such as lung cancer and cancers of mouth) are caused by tobacco use and another 20% from infections such as hepatitis B that cause liver cancer and human papillomavirus, which can lead to cervical cancer. Cancer cases in India are rising not just because of better diagnostic facilities but also owing to the shift in the way we lead our lives. Tobacco and alcohol use, consumption of processed food, air pollution and obesity are among its biggest triggers. India recorded an estimated 3.9 million cancer cases in 2016, data available with the National Cancer Registry Programme of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) shows. Obesity grew two-fold in India between 2005 and 2015 — 20.7% of women and 18.6% of men are obese, shows National Family Health Survey-4 data released this year. ICMR estimates say India is likely to have more than 17.3 lakh new cases of cancer and more than 8.8 lakh deaths due to the disease by 2020.

But the silver lining is that cancer risk can be slashed significantly by curtailing tobacco use, getting vaccinations for certain types of cancer and adopting a healthier lifestyle. Changes that reduce the burden of cancer will also have a positive effect on the economy. A combination of tobacco control, alcohol control, vaccination programmes and cancer screening will lead to significant gains for both the health as well as the economy.

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