



## **COVID WILL CONTINUE TO DISRUPT HEALTH SYSTEMS AND SUPPLY-CHAIN NEXT YEAR; EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND COMMUNITY PRECAUTIONS REQUIRED**

The threat of COVID has waned, but it is still not over. Over the past three years, the pandemic disrupted all kinds of healthcare, from childhood immunizations to elective surgeries and screenings for cancer. The pandemic shortened life expectancy in many countries and fueled mental health concerns. The impact of long COVID continues to affect a multitude of people.

People with compromised immune systems must continue to remain vigilant against COVID, particularly in cases of localized outbreaks. A new variant of coronavirus could dramatically undermine the current range of vaccines and treatments.

The WHO has warned against complacency and has flagged the issue of many countries reducing their surveillance capacity for COVID-19 over the past year. After three years of the pandemic that has left many countries grappling with overstretched health systems, we simply cannot afford to put our healthcare systems under more pressure. A new variant of concern, anywhere, anytime, could pose another threat and we must be able to anticipate, detect and respond in time. This year, countries need to redouble their efforts to implement proven effective strategies and avoid being complacent.

The pandemic continues to pose significant challenges for supply chains globally, including those for the life sciences sector. Even in 2022, national lockdowns slowed or even temporarily stopped the flow of raw materials and finished goods, disrupting manufacturing as a result. In India's healthcare industry, the main concern would be for the pharma sector which still imports almost 70% of APIs from China.

As far as healthcare supply chains are concerned, they must not only become resilient but also adapt to changing situations and evolve quickly to sidestep any possible disruptive state of affairs like lockdowns, clogged shipping lanes, and ports to keep functioning normally in the new normal.

The WHO has recommended continuing the 5 pandemic stabilizers that have proven so effective, such as increasing vaccine uptake in the general population, administering additional vaccine doses to priority groups, promoting mask-wearing indoors and in public transportation, ventilating crowded and public spaces such as schools, bars and restaurants, open-space offices and public transportation, and providing early and appropriate therapeutics to patients at risk of severe disease.



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In India, the focus now should be on building resilience in terms of lab capacity, human resources, regular surveillance, and capacity-building in hospitals to face a resurgence of cases. In light of the devastating second wave, there is also a need to ensure that healthcare equipment bought as part of Covid response are utilised and repurposed.

Data metrics like testing, hospitalisation, and outpatient facilities have to be well-integrated. Keeping a track of the epidemiological pattern of rising infections, clinical patterns of rising hospitalisations, and genomic patterns of emerging virus variants would prepare us if the situation turns worse.

## INDIA'S G20 PRESIDENCY AND THE HEALTH WORKING GROUP

India's G20 Presidency will focus on three main priorities: Health Emergencies Prevention, Preparedness and Response (One Health & AMR); Access and Availability to Affordable Medical countermeasures (Vaccines, Therapeutics, and Diagnostics); and Digital Health Innovations and Solutions to Aid Universal Health Coverage and Improve Healthcare Service Delivery.

At the first 3-day G20 Health Working Group (HWG) meeting in Thiruvananthapuram under India's presidency of the bloc that began on January 18, New Delhi underlined that managing pandemics should be a key part of India's health policy due to the economic impact of such crises. India stressed that pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response require coordinated efforts between multiple sectors and agencies and that there is a need to strengthen and empower communities for health emergencies.

The Health Track of the G20 India Presidency will comprise three more HWG meetings and one Health Ministerial Meeting (HMM). India plans to host a side event along with each HWG meeting to enrich, supplement and support G20 discussions. These include side events on Medical Value Travel and Digital Health; a workshop on collaborative research on drugs, diagnostics, and vaccines; and a co-branded event on Global Centre for Traditional Medicine.

India aims to continue and consolidate health priorities and key takeaways from previous presidencies while highlighting critical areas that require strengthening. India also aims to achieve convergence in discussions across various multilateral fora engaged in health cooperation and work towards integrated action. India is known as the Pharmacy of the World and the country will be able to leverage the agenda of the HWG to promote distributed manufacturing of vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics globally so as to manage future health emergencies.

India is already in a leadership position in Digital Health exemplified by such solutions and platforms as Co-WIN, Telemedicine, and COVID-19 India platform which highlight the advantages of data-driven insights and use of technology for accessibility, ease of availability, and affordability in health service delivery. All these can be used for the greater good of the G20 group in line with India's theme 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'.





# GOVERNMENT'S INCREASED FOCUS ON TB ERADICATION AND NCDS



The multi-pronged National Strategic Plan for TB Elimination launched in 2017 to achieve the target of ending TB by 2025 continues in a mission mode. It aims to detect all TB patients with an emphasis on reaching TB patients seeking care from private providers and undiagnosed TB in high-risk populations. A range of forward-looking policies has been implemented including critical schemes such as Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana (NPY), which helped meet the nutritional requirements of TB patients, especially the underserved. From 2018 till August 2022, around Rs 1,707 crore has been disbursed to more than 65 lakh people for TB treatment across the country. In September this year, the government launched a new voluntary programme Ni-kshay Mitra to sponsor rations for needy TB patients.

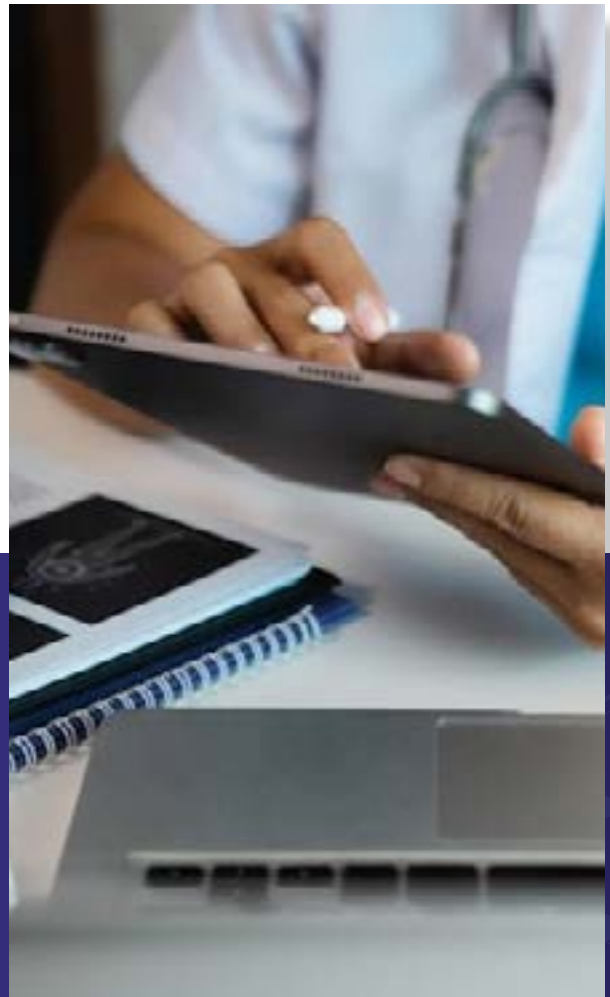
The government's efforts to engage the private sector have led to Patient Provider Support Agencies (PPSA) being rolled out across 250 districts through the domestic set up and Joint Effort for Elimination of Tuberculosis (JEET) initiative, leading to 32% of all TB patients being notified from the private sector. By the end of this year, over 150,000 Ayushman Bharat - Health and Wellness Centres would be operational to decentralize comprehensive primary healthcare including TB care services at the grassroots level.

The government is also focusing on non-communicable diseases, particularly cancer as part of the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS). The government is boosting infrastructure, human resource development, health promotion and awareness generation for cancer prevention, early diagnosis, management and referral to an appropriate level of the healthcare facility for the treatment of NCDs. Diagnostics are crucial in the fight against NCDs because they facilitate the early detection of NCDs biomarkers with high sensitivity to help detect diseases at their initial stages for easier treatment and faster cures.

The government recently launched the Heal in India programme, a targeted outreach programme to boost medical value travel to India, with special focus on NCDs. The government's Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) designed to change the country's healthcare system, includes a unique health ID for every citizen and digital health solutions for hospitals across India, simplifying hospitalization. The medical profile of all citizens will be recorded and projected digitally. The health card will allow the citizen to access and share health data with their consent, getting involved with the healthcare providers and payers. This will be a game changer for health data analytics in India.



# DIGITAL HEALTH TRENDS



Technology is revolutionizing healthcare to such an extent that it has virtually ended the concept of treating patients with medicines alone. The pandemic was a major catalyst that is transforming India's healthcare landscape from a curative to a preventive care model with a more patient-centric and digitised approach. Timely diagnosis at the primary care level is an important aspect of preventive care in which digital diagnostics has a vital role to play. The government has been proactive with programs like the National Digital Health Mission (NDHM) to bridge the gap among different stakeholders in the healthcare ecosystem through digital diagnostics.

Artificial intelligence (AI) will be the pivot in digital health. AI-powered digital health platforms with predictive analytics capabilities can intervene faster and more efficiently to prevent unnecessary emergent care. In a densely populated country like India, this will benefit both patients and hospitals that often struggle with a huge rush of people seeking treatment. AI can be used to improve health outcomes, lower costs, and improve the patient experience. It could also be used to enhance digital therapeutics by providing more data on how patients respond to treatments. Digitization will eventually lead to standardization of healthcare protocols and make services more accessible, seamless and transparent.

With the rollout of 5G, India is poised even better for the quicker advancement of digital health as the rising number of smartphone users presents an opportunity for digital diagnostics to reach the remotest parts of the country and eliminate the rural-urban divide in healthcare facilities. Digital health can also be used to address the rising incidence of lifestyle diseases in urban India. We must ensure that preventive care is made available before complications arise, particularly in individuals with a family history of NCDs. Rural India is worse off mainly due to lack of awareness and access to quality healthcare although the situation is now changing for the better with point-of-care diagnostics acting as a panacea for access to healthcare.

Pocket-friendly wearable medical devices that track various health parameters and send a report directly to the smartphone, which can be easily accessed by a consulting specialist are another way through which people can now get access to affordable diagnostics.

Digital health also brings into focus data security and privacy. While data breach by healthcare providers is punishable, there is a growing understanding in the Indian healthcare industry of the significance of implementing data security safeguards to preserve patients' confidential information and only share it when needed by law.





# ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ON HEALTH IN 2023

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If the past eight years are any indication, 2023 will likely be one of the warmest years on record creating an increasingly grave impact on human health. In 2022, rising greenhouse gas emissions and accumulated heat caused extreme heatwaves, drought, and devastating floods impacting millions, according to the World Meteorological Organization's provisional "State of the Global Climate in 2022" report. The burden on healthcare systems is expected to worsen in 2023 due to the growing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events forcibly displacing vulnerable populations.

The loss of biodiversity is also a serious threat for human health. According to the UN, human activity has transformed nearly 67% of the earth's surface area. This unprecedented level of encroachment by humans into nature is putting us in serious risk of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19, which has once again put the world's governments on high alert as we begin 2023.

The World Health Organization considers air pollution as the "the world's largest single environmental health risk," which is a particularly a major concern for India and is expected to worsen in 2023. A recent study on aerosol pollution in India from the Bose Institute projects a dramatic increase in 2023 with Maharashtra expected to move to the "highly vulnerable" red zone and Punjab seeing a 20% rise in air pollution.

Water pollution is another major environmental health concern for India. The Composite Water Management Index (CWMI) report 2018 of NITI Aayog stated that about two lakh people die every year due to inadequate access to safe water. The report estimated that about 600 million people may face water stress thus constituting about 40% of India's projected population by 2030.

In recent years, the Indian government has taken several initiatives to address these environmental health challenges also recently unequivocally calling healthcare a high priority area. It has also recognized the importance of addressing the underlying causes of environmental health problems in recent years. For example, the government has implemented stricter regulations on industries and transportation to reduce air pollution and has launched programs to promote the use of cleaner fuels and technologies. It has also invested in infrastructure to improve waste management and sewage treatment and has implemented policies to encourage the responsible disposal of plastic and other materials.

However, as the world's projected most populous country in 2023, India should look to step up its preparation for climate, environmental, and economic challenges by focusing on disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and building resilience in healthcare, particularly for its lowest income and most vulnerable people comprising nearly 70% of the country's total population. In addition to these efforts – we can also expect to see greater collaboration between governments, corporations, and philanthropists in 2023 towards addressing these cascading crises in an impactful manner.



# GEOPOLITICAL SCENARIO AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTHCARE

2022 was a tumultuous year in geopolitics with a war still raging between Russia and Ukraine. Since the war began in February, India handed over several consignments of humanitarian aid comprising essential medicines and equipment to Ukraine as part of its effort to help it mitigate the economic hardships. India has also supplied Sri Lanka with 50 tonnes of medical assistance after the island nation's economy collapsed. In many ways, India has emerged as a regional power and net security provider in the Indo-Pacific as its capacity to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to its citizens as well as regional partners has grown in recent years.

But 2023 may be a different cup of tea. Geopolitical events can often have profound impacts on local, regional, and even global healthcare markets. Globalization has meant that many major healthcare providers, payers, and health tech firms operate across many global regions instead of remaining local. Hence, political, social, and geographic events can place unexpected strain on players in the healthcare space.

Governments across the world will also have to take into account the impact of climate change which needs to be considered at multiple levels, beyond the immediate effects of extreme weather events. It is quite possible that health risks associated with climate change may increase. This phenomenon may already be quickening the emergence of new and re-emerging of old infectious diseases, illustrated by the multiple "unusual" outbreaks of the 21st century, including SARS, Ebola, COVID-19, and monkey pox.

The pandemic showed that most of the state actors, especially the ones who had promoted the benefits of an open economy and boosting trade through globalization, started to wave the flag of nationalism coupled with populism. Such eventualities could occur in again. As G20 president, India will have a key role in the emerging geopolitical order to shape the global agenda in 2023. Given the long-term implications of geopolitical developments, Indian policymakers will have to carefully assess their policy choices.



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