



SELF-CARE AND PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

THE BIG PICTURE

Experts agree that the next pandemic is not a matter of if, but when.

- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of health systems worldwide, severely disrupting health services, economies, and daily life. The pandemic demonstrated that no single country was adequately prepared to deal with a novel virus with the capacity to spread exponentially and affect all communities across the globe.
- The pandemic also underscored the critical importance of primary health care (PHC). Strong PHC systems should have the capacity to respond to disease outbreaks and maintain essential health services during times of crisis.
- The risks to global health security are growing. New and emerging infectious diseases, the resurgence of pathogens with epidemic potential, and rising antimicrobial resistance continue to pose a threat. Climate change further exacerbates these risks, accelerating the spread of vector-borne diseases and increasing the frequency of extreme weather events that strain already fragile health systems.
- Additionally, rapid population growth and increased human mobility – driven by urbanization, economic migration, and displacement due to conflict or climate change – amplify the speed at which diseases spread across borders.
- The probability of another pandemic occurring within one's lifetime is roughly 17% and may increase to 44% within the next couple of decades. Communities and health systems must be better prepared to confront these risks.¹
- Recent trends of donor funding plateauing or declining are placing additional strain on already overstretched health systems.

THE ROLE OF SELF-CARE

A resilient primary healthcare system is the backbone of effective preparedness and response efforts in public health emergencies. Self-care, as a critical element of PHC, plays a crucial role in addressing emerging health threats, maintaining essential services, and empowering individuals to manage their own health.

- Health crises – whether pandemics, natural disasters, or conflicts – disrupt access to healthcare, underscoring the urgent need for affordable, safe, effective, and high-quality solutions to maintain essential services.

In these contexts, self-care has emerged as a key strategy for ensuring continuity of care when health systems are overwhelmed or access to facility-based services is limited.

- The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends prioritizing self-care interventions, digital health services, task sharing, and outreach to ensure access to medicines, diagnostics, devices, information, and counseling when facility-based health services are disrupted, such as during disease outbreaks.²
- Self-care strengthens health systems by putting health in the hands of communities. It enhances detection by enabling communities to recognize symptoms and seek timely screening or diagnostics, and it supports management and prevention through effective risk communication, promotion of protective behaviors, and reduced transmission.³
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, self-care innovations enabled countries to maintain essential services.³ For example:
 - » Advances in self-initiated reproductive health technologies, such as pregnancy self-testing, self-administered injectable contraceptives, and self-managed medication abortion, allowed women to continue receiving vital care from the comfort of their homes.
 - » Shifts toward the private sector and virtual platforms for information sharing and telemedicine assisted people living with HIV, tuberculosis, or non-communicable diseases to receive remote clinical care and guidance when health care facilities were overwhelmed or inaccessible.

THE CALL TO ACTION

Join the Self-Care Trailblazer Group (SCTG) in championing self-care as an integral part of pandemic preparedness.

- Raise awareness of the critical link between self-care and pandemic preparedness. Highlight how self-care approaches can both mitigate disease threats and ensure continuity of essential health services when facility-based care is disrupted.
- Promote the integration of self-care into pandemic preparedness plans, recognizing it as a first line of defense, within a well-resourced and well-functioning primary healthcare system.
- Advocate for national self-care strategies to recognize and provide clear operational guidance on the role of self-care in responding to pandemics, climate-related disasters, and other shocks and stressors.
- Urge countries to prioritize self-care interventions in pandemic fund proposals and other global health security funding opportunities.

DIG DEEPER

Consult these resources to learn more about self-care and pandemic preparedness.

- [Self-Care's Contribution to Global Health Security and Pandemic Preparedness](#)
- [Self-Testing and Self-Care](#)
- [Self-Care and Health: By All, For All: Learning from COVID-19](#)

REFERENCES

1. Williams, B.A., Jones, C.H., Welch, V. et al. (2023). Outlook of pandemic preparedness in a post-COVID-19 world. *NPJ Vaccines* (8)178. doi.org/10.1038/s41541-023-00773-0.
2. *WHO guideline on self-care interventions for health and well-being, 2022 revision*. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022.
3. “Self-Care’s Contribution to Global Health Security and Pandemic Preparedness,” Self-Care Trailblazer Group, accessed January 13, 2025, www.psi.org/project/self-care/self-cares-contribution-to-global-health-security-and-pandemic-preparedness.

