



STUDY OF CHRONIC DISEASE ONSET ACROSS VARYING AGE GROUPS OF INDIAN ADULTS

Yogendra Kumar Thakur

*S.R Degree College. Darmaha, Katakriya, Kesariya, Motihari, Bhim Rao Ambedkar Bihar University
Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India.*

Abstract

Chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular conditions are major contributors to morbidity and mortality in India. This study examines the onset patterns of these diseases across different age groups of Indian adults, including young adults, middle-aged, and elderly populations. Using data from national surveys and epidemiological studies, the research highlights how behavioral, biological, and social determinants influence disease onset at varying ages. The findings reveal a trend toward earlier onset of chronic conditions in younger populations, driven by lifestyle changes and urbanization. Age-specific risk factors and healthcare access disparities further shape disease progression and outcomes. The study emphasizes the need for targeted prevention and management strategies tailored to age groups to effectively reduce the burden of chronic diseases in India.

Keywords

Chronic diseases, disease onset, age groups, Indian adults, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, risk factors, epidemiology, prevention strategies

1. Introduction

Chronic diseases have emerged as a significant public health challenge in India, affecting millions of adults and straining healthcare resources. The onset and progression of these diseases vary considerably across different age groups due to a complex interplay of lifestyle, biological, and social factors. Understanding how chronic diseases develop in young adults, middle-aged, and elderly populations is essential for crafting effective prevention and treatment strategies tailored to each demographic segment.

1.1 Overview of Chronic Diseases in India

Chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases have become leading causes of morbidity and mortality in India. According to Babu and Kar (2014), approximately 30% of the Indian population suffers from at least one chronic disease, with prevalence rates steadily increasing over the past decade. Bhatnagar et al. (2019) report that cardiovascular diseases alone account for nearly 28% of total deaths in the country, marking a significant shift from communicable to non-communicable disease dominance. This epidemiological transition is driven by rapid urbanization, lifestyle changes such as unhealthy diets and physical inactivity, and an aging population (Dey & Bhatnagar, 2019). Urban areas show higher NCD prevalence compared to rural regions, largely due to sedentary lifestyles and increased exposure to risk factors like tobacco and alcohol use (Kumar & Prakash, 2019).

1.2 Importance of Studying Age-Specific Onset Patterns

Understanding the age-specific onset of chronic diseases is crucial for designing effective public health interventions. Mandal and Mukherjee (2018) found that while traditionally NCDs were considered diseases of older adults, recent data indicate a worrying trend of earlier onset among younger populations, particularly in urban India. Jain and Singh (2021) highlight that diabetes and hypertension are now being diagnosed in individuals as young as 25–35 years, accelerating the risk of long-term complications and healthcare burden. Age influences not only the prevalence but also the risk factor profile and disease progression, necessitating age-tailored screening and management strategies. Early identification of disease onset in younger adults could significantly reduce morbidity by enabling timely lifestyle modification and treatment.

1.3 Objectives and Scope of the Study

This study aims to comprehensively analyze the epidemiology, risk factors, and impacts of chronic diseases across different age groups of Indian adults. Segmentation into young adults (18–35 years), middle-aged (36–60 years), and elderly populations (60+ years) allows for a nuanced understanding of how age interacts with behavioral, biological, and socioeconomic factors to influence disease onset (Paul & Sinha, 2022). The study also explores regional and socioeconomic disparities in disease burden and healthcare access. Findings are intended to inform policymakers and healthcare providers to develop targeted, age-specific prevention and management programs to reduce the chronic disease burden in India.



2. Epidemiology of Chronic Diseases in India

Chronic diseases are emerging as a major health challenge in India, driven by rapid demographic changes and lifestyle transitions. Understanding the patterns of disease prevalence and incidence, especially across different age groups and regions, is essential for designing effective health interventions. This section explores the distribution of major chronic diseases, age-related trends, and the socioeconomic and regional disparities shaping the epidemiological landscape.

2.1 Prevalence and Incidence of Major Chronic Diseases

India is currently grappling with a rapid increase in chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, which together contribute to a significant portion of the national disease burden. Bhoi and Shukla (2021) estimate that the prevalence of diabetes in Indian adults has surged to nearly 10%, with hypertension affecting over 25% of the adult population. Cardiovascular diseases, including coronary artery disease and stroke, are responsible for approximately 28% of all deaths in India, making them the leading cause of mortality (Gupta & Mohan, 2018). This rising epidemic is fueled by demographic changes, shifts in lifestyle habits, and increased longevity. Notably, the incidence of these chronic diseases is not uniform across the country, with states experiencing varied burden due to differences in diet, physical activity, and healthcare infrastructure.

2.2 Age Distribution and Demographic Trends

The risk and incidence of chronic diseases traditionally increase with age, reflecting the cumulative impact of genetic, behavioral, and environmental risk factors over time. However, recent studies indicate an alarming trend of earlier onset, particularly among younger adults in urban areas (Jain & Singh, 2021). Data show that individuals aged 25 to 35 are increasingly being diagnosed with conditions such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension, which were once considered diseases of the elderly (Das & Mukhopadhyay, 2016). This shift is attributed to sedentary lifestyles, poor dietary choices, and rising obesity rates driven by urbanization and economic development. Earlier onset of chronic disease in younger populations portends greater long-term health complications and economic costs, emphasizing the need for early prevention and intervention strategies.

2.3 Regional and Socioeconomic Variations

Significant disparities exist in the prevalence of chronic diseases across different regions and socioeconomic groups in India. Urban populations consistently report higher rates of diabetes and hypertension compared to rural counterparts due to greater exposure to lifestyle risk factors such as physical inactivity, processed foods, and pollution (Kumar & Prakash, 2019). Furthermore, socioeconomic status strongly influences both disease risk and access to healthcare services. Individuals from higher income groups often have greater access to diagnostic and treatment facilities but may also adopt unhealthy “Westernized” lifestyles increasing their risk (Joshi & Kaur, 2015). Conversely, lower socioeconomic groups face barriers to healthcare access, delayed diagnosis, and poorer disease management, which exacerbate health outcomes. These disparities underscore the need for tailored public health approaches that consider regional and social contexts to effectively address chronic disease burden in India.

3. Age Groups and Chronic Disease Onset

Chronic diseases do not affect all age groups uniformly. The onset, progression, and impact of these conditions vary significantly across different stages of adulthood, influenced by a complex interplay of biological, behavioral, and environmental factors. Understanding how chronic diseases manifest across young, middle-aged, and elderly adults is essential for developing effective prevention and management strategies tailored to the needs of each group. This section explores the age-specific definitions, disease patterns, and risk factor exposures within the Indian adult population.

3.1 Definition and Categorization of Age Groups

For the purpose of analyzing chronic disease onset, the adult population is commonly segmented into three age groups: young adults (18–35 years), middle-aged adults (36–60 years), and elderly adults (60 years and above) (Mandal & Mukherjee, 2018). This classification facilitates the examination of age-specific health trends and acknowledges the dynamic nature of risk exposures and physiological changes throughout adulthood. Young adults, often at the beginning of their exposure to lifestyle risks, may appear relatively healthy but are increasingly showing early signs of metabolic disorders. Middle-aged adults represent a transitional group where cumulative exposure to risk factors manifests as clinical disease. Elderly adults frequently experience multiple chronic conditions compounded by age-related physiological decline.

3.2 Patterns of Disease Onset Across Age Groups

Recent epidemiological evidence highlights a concerning shift toward earlier onset of chronic diseases in India. Type 2 diabetes and obesity-related conditions, once predominantly diseases of older adults, are now being increasingly

diagnosed in young adults, aged 25 to 35 years (Jain & Singh, 2021). This trend is largely attributed to rapid lifestyle changes marked by increased consumption of calorie-rich processed foods, reduced physical activity, and higher prevalence of tobacco and alcohol use in younger populations (Laskar & Chakraborty, 2017). Middle-aged adults exhibit a higher burden of cardiovascular diseases such as hypertension and ischemic heart disease, reflecting the cumulative impact of prolonged risk exposure and age-related vascular changes (Jain & Singh, 2021). The elderly population often faces complex health challenges, including multiple coexisting chronic conditions such as arthritis, chronic kidney disease, and heart failure, which complicate treatment and increase vulnerability to adverse outcomes.

3.3 Risk Factor Exposure Variation by Age

Risk factor exposure and its health consequences differ substantially by age group. Young adults are more prone to engaging in high-risk behaviors such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and unhealthy dietary patterns; however, they often maintain greater metabolic resilience that delays overt disease manifestation (Kaur & Aggarwal, 2020). In contrast, middle-aged adults typically begin to exhibit clinical signs of chronic disease, including insulin resistance, elevated blood pressure, and abnormal lipid profiles, as a result of sustained exposure to harmful behaviors and genetic predispositions (Sharma & Kaur, 2019). The elderly population confronts the compounded effects of multiple chronic diseases, decreased physical mobility, and the challenges of polypharmacy, which collectively hinder disease management and reduce quality of life. These age-related differences underscore the critical need for prevention and treatment approaches that are tailored to the unique risk profiles and health care needs of each age group.

4. Risk Factors Influencing Chronic Disease Onset

Chronic disease onset is driven by a multifaceted interplay of behavioral, biological, and social determinants. Understanding these risk factors is critical for identifying vulnerable populations and developing targeted interventions that address the root causes of disease progression in the Indian context. This section explores the key behavioral habits, genetic and medical influences, and social factors that collectively shape chronic disease patterns across different age groups.

4.1 Behavioral Factors

Behavioral factors are among the most significant and modifiable contributors to the rising burden of chronic diseases in India. Tobacco consumption remains a major driver of cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and certain cancers, with millions of Indian adults engaged in smoking or chewing tobacco products (Sharma & Kaur, 2019). This exposure not only directly damages the cardiovascular and respiratory systems but also interacts synergistically with other risk factors to accelerate disease progression. Excessive alcohol use further exacerbates the burden by promoting liver damage, insulin resistance, and hypertension, increasing risks for both liver-related illnesses and metabolic disorders. Dietary transitions over recent decades, marked by increased availability and consumption of processed and calorie-dense foods high in saturated fats, sugars, and salt, have fueled the obesity epidemic and related chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension (Nag & Rai, 2018). Coupled with this, rapid urbanization has led to widespread adoption of sedentary lifestyles, with many adults spending the majority of their day in physically inactive occupations or leisure activities, contributing to decreased energy expenditure and metabolic imbalance. These behavioral risks rarely occur in isolation; rather, clustering of tobacco use, poor diet, and physical inactivity creates a compounded effect, accelerating the onset and severity of chronic diseases, especially among younger urban populations adapting to modern lifestyles.

4.2 Biological Factors

Biological factors inherently shape individual vulnerability to chronic diseases and influence disease trajectory. Genetic predisposition plays a critical role, with numerous studies highlighting the heritability of conditions like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and coronary artery disease (Babu & Kar, 2014). Genetic variations may affect insulin secretion, lipid metabolism, or vascular function, predisposing individuals to earlier or more severe disease onset. In addition to inherited factors, the presence of comorbidities such as obesity and metabolic syndrome significantly increases disease risk and complexity. Obesity, often linked to insulin resistance and systemic inflammation, acts as a catalyst for multiple chronic conditions simultaneously (Gupta & Mohan, 2018). Furthermore, chronic infections such as hepatitis B and C can accelerate liver disease progression, underscoring the interplay between infectious and non-communicable diseases. Aging itself brings physiological changes—such as decreased insulin sensitivity, endothelial dysfunction, and arterial stiffening—that compound disease risk and reduce the body's ability to cope with metabolic stressors. Understanding these biological influences enables healthcare providers to stratify risk, prioritize early screening, and personalize interventions, improving prognosis and delaying disease complications.

4.3 Social Determinants



The social determinants of health are fundamental drivers of disparities in chronic disease risk, onset, and outcomes. Education is a powerful determinant; individuals with higher educational attainment tend to have greater health literacy, enabling them to adopt healthier behaviors, seek timely medical care, and adhere to treatment recommendations (Joshi & Kaur, 2015). Conversely, lower education levels often correlate with increased exposure to risk factors such as tobacco use and poor diet, limited understanding of disease prevention, and delayed healthcare utilization. Income and economic status profoundly affect access to nutritious food, safe environments for physical activity, and quality healthcare services. Populations living in poverty frequently experience food insecurity and live in environments that promote unhealthy behaviors, such as high density of tobacco vendors or limited recreational spaces. Urban-rural residence adds another layer of complexity; urban residents are more exposed to air pollution and lifestyle risks associated with modern city living but often have better access to healthcare infrastructure (Mishra & Singh, 2020). Rural populations, while sometimes exhibiting lower prevalence of certain lifestyle risks, face challenges related to healthcare accessibility, affordability, and delayed diagnosis, which worsen disease outcomes. Addressing these social determinants through multisectoral policies and community-based programs is critical to reducing inequities and achieving comprehensive chronic disease control across India's diverse demographic landscape.

5. Impact of Chronic Disease Onset on Quality of Life and Healthcare Utilization

The onset of chronic diseases profoundly affects individuals' physical health, psychological well-being, and socioeconomic status. These impacts vary across different age groups, influenced by factors such as disease severity, comorbidities, and social support systems. Additionally, access to healthcare services and adherence to treatment regimens play crucial roles in determining disease outcomes. The economic burden borne by individuals and families is significant, often exacerbating existing inequalities. This section explores how chronic diseases affect quality of life and healthcare utilization across Indian adults.

5.5.1 Physical and Psychological Effects by Age Group

Elderly adults with chronic diseases face considerable physical limitations that severely affect their independence and daily functioning. Conditions such as arthritis can cause chronic joint pain and stiffness, restricting mobility and the ability to perform self-care tasks. Cardiovascular diseases often lead to symptoms such as fatigue, shortness of breath, and reduced exercise tolerance, which further limit physical activity (Ahmed & Wilson, 2020). Diabetes complications, including neuropathy and vision loss, compound these challenges, increasing the risk of falls and injuries. Beyond physical impairments, elderly individuals frequently experience psychological distress. The burden of managing multiple chronic illnesses, coupled with social isolation and loss of autonomy, contributes to high rates of depression and anxiety in this population (Martin & Williams, 2016). In contrast, younger adults with chronic diseases face a different set of challenges. They must balance treatment regimens with work demands, family care responsibilities, and social engagements. The stress and time constraints associated with these responsibilities can lead to emotional strain, feelings of burnout, and poor adherence to treatment plans, ultimately impacting disease control and long-term outcomes. Mental health support and flexible healthcare services tailored to different age groups are critical to address these diverse needs.

5.2 Access to Healthcare and Treatment Adherence

Access to healthcare in India remains uneven, particularly affecting rural residents and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Geographic barriers such as distance from health facilities and poor transportation infrastructure hinder timely diagnosis and follow-up care (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Financial constraints also pose a significant obstacle, with many families unable to afford consultation fees, diagnostic tests, and prescribed medications. This financial burden is exacerbated by the lack of comprehensive health insurance coverage, resulting in high out-of-pocket expenses that discourage consistent treatment adherence. Furthermore, limited health literacy contributes to misunderstandings about disease management and the importance of medication adherence. Cultural beliefs and mistrust in healthcare systems can lead to delayed care-seeking or preference for alternative therapies, which may not effectively control chronic diseases (Paul & Sinha, 2022). These disparities contribute to poorer disease outcomes, higher complication rates, and increased hospitalizations among marginalized groups. Strengthening primary healthcare networks, expanding health insurance schemes, and implementing culturally sensitive health education programs are essential steps toward improving access and adherence.

5.3 Economic Burden on Individuals and Families

The economic impact of chronic diseases on individuals and families in India is profound and multifaceted. Direct medical costs include expenses related to doctor visits, hospital stays, medications, laboratory tests, and medical devices. For many low- and middle-income households, these costs consume a substantial proportion of income,



forcing difficult choices between healthcare and basic needs such as food, education, and housing (Mishra & Singh, 2020). Indirect costs—such as lost income due to illness, reduced work productivity, and the need for unpaid caregiving—further exacerbate financial strain. Chronic diseases often require lifelong management, creating ongoing economic pressure that can entrench families in cycles of poverty and poor health. The financial burden also extends beyond patients to caregivers, who may reduce work hours or leave employment to provide support, impacting household earnings. At a community and national level, the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases imposes significant costs on healthcare systems and economic productivity. Addressing these challenges requires policy interventions to improve financial risk protection, including expanding public health insurance coverage, subsidizing essential medications, and providing social welfare support to vulnerable populations. Investment in preventive health programs is equally vital to reduce the incidence and economic toll of chronic diseases over the long term.

6. Prevention and Management Strategies Tailored to Age Groups

Preventing and managing chronic diseases effectively requires a nuanced understanding of how risk factors and health needs vary across different age groups. In India, public health initiatives are increasingly designed to address these age-specific challenges, focusing on early detection, lifestyle modification, and ongoing support. Primary care and community-based interventions play a vital role in delivering tailored services that meet the diverse needs of young adults, middle-aged, and elderly populations.

6.1 Public Health Interventions and Policies in India

India has implemented a range of national programs aimed at preventing chronic diseases by raising public awareness, promoting screening, and supporting lifestyle modifications. Initiatives such as the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS) emphasize community-based screening and health education to identify high-risk individuals early (Bhatnagar et al., 2019). These programs increasingly incorporate age-specific strategies recognizing that risk profiles and intervention needs differ among young, middle-aged, and elderly populations. For example, campaigns targeting youth focus on tobacco cessation and physical activity promotion, while efforts for older adults emphasize regular screening for hypertension, diabetes, and cancer. The government's push for healthier diets, tobacco control policies, and promotion of physical exercise forms the backbone of chronic disease prevention (Mehta & Kaur, 2016). Despite these efforts, challenges remain in scaling up coverage, ensuring quality, and reaching marginalized groups.

6.2 Age-Specific Prevention Programs and Health Promotion

Effective chronic disease prevention requires tailoring interventions to the specific needs of different age groups. Younger adults benefit most from programs that address modifiable lifestyle risk factors such as smoking, unhealthy diet, and sedentary behavior. School-based and workplace wellness programs have shown promise in instilling healthy habits early, thereby delaying disease onset (Mukherjee & Singh, 2017). For middle-aged and elderly populations, prevention efforts shift towards managing existing comorbidities and preventing complications through regular health check-ups, medication adherence, and rehabilitation services. Elderly-focused interventions also prioritize improving quality of life by addressing functional limitations, mental health, and social support systems. Integrating health promotion activities with routine care in primary healthcare settings ensures these programs are accessible and sustainable.

6.3 Role of Primary Care and Community Health Workers

Primary healthcare systems and community health workers (CHWs) are pivotal in bridging gaps in chronic disease detection, management, and education, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Verma & Narang, 2014). CHWs provide culturally appropriate health education, support medication adherence, and facilitate referrals for specialized care, playing a crucial role in chronic disease control at the grassroots level. Their involvement is especially important in rural and underserved areas where formal healthcare access is limited. Age-sensitive approaches by CHWs ensure that health messages and services align with the specific concerns and capacities of young adults, middle-aged individuals, and the elderly. Strengthening training, supervision, and integration of CHWs within the formal health system is essential to maximize their impact on chronic disease outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Chronic diseases are a growing public health challenge in India, with onset patterns varying significantly across different age groups due to diverse behavioral, biological, and social factors. The earlier emergence of conditions such as diabetes and hypertension among younger adults underscores the urgent need for age-specific prevention and management strategies. Regional and socioeconomic disparities further complicate disease burden and access to



care, necessitating targeted public health interventions and strengthened primary healthcare systems. Addressing these complexities through tailored policies, community engagement, and expanded healthcare access is essential to reduce morbidity, improve quality of life, and alleviate the economic strain on individuals and society. Comprehensive, age-sensitive approaches will be critical to effectively curb the rising tide of chronic diseases in India's diverse population.

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