

Increasing Cross-Sectoral Collaboration in Advocacy Efforts for Ear and Hearing Care Services

January 2025

Phase 1 Map: Saudi Arabia

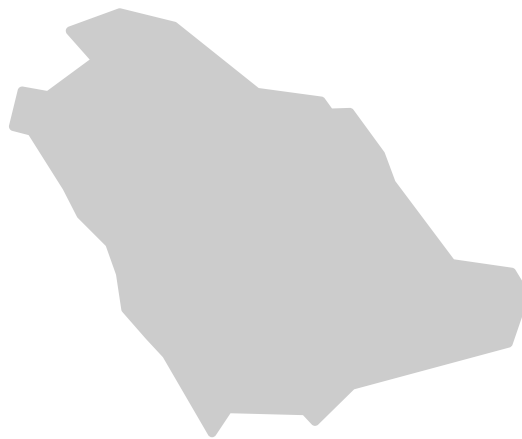




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Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has an approximate population of 36 million people. Aligned with global trends, Saudi Arabia's population continues to age with the median age forecasted to rise from 29.6 years in 2024 to 32.0 years in 2050.¹ As of 2023, Saudi Arabia's older adult population, aged 65 years and older, reached over 1 million people, representing 3% of the total population.² Based on projections by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), the older adult population aged 60 years and older will reach up to 40 million by 2050, accounting for 25% of the total population.³

As the population rises, there are concurrent trends of cognitive decline and hearing loss. These trends perpetuate ageist beliefs that diminishing hearing and cognitive abilities are inevitable aspects of ageing.

Consequently, the prevalence of varying degrees of hearing loss is on the rise in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, hearing loss is mostly attributable to age-related hearing loss (ARHL). According to a 2021 study, it was found that 43.4% of the older adult population aged 50+ years old experienced some form of hearing loss.⁴ Specifically, this subset of older adults was more likely to have bilateral hearing loss, sensorineural type, and hearing loss associated with tinnitus.⁵ Furthermore, as hearing loss is linked to an increased risk of dementia, it is found to be a modifiable risk factor necessary to prevent cognitive decline in older adults. According to the Ministry of Health (MOH), in 2023, the national prevalence of dementia was 5%, with the rate steadily increasing in older adults aged 65 years and older.⁶

Despite this evidence, Saudi Arabia does not currently have a national strategy for hearing or ear care for older adults; however, related initiatives are integrated into broader healthcare strategies and policies. Conversely, a national universal newborn hearing screening (UNHS) program is in effect.⁷ It is also important to note that as of March 2024, 92.4% of audiologists in Saudi Arabia believe that hospital resources for hearing care are insufficient. They report a lack of video head impulse tests, automated auditory brain stem responses, vestibular rehabilitation services, cochlear implants, and clinics.⁸

National Aged Care Plan

National Strategy for the Health of Elderly, 2017-2030

Saudi Arabia's National Strategy for Health of the Elderly, published in 2017 and spanning until 2030, is a comprehensive framework aimed at significantly enhancing the quality and accessibility of health and social care for the elderly. This strategy is built on the principles of integrated service delivery, focusing on the unique needs of older adults through coordinated care across primary, specialist, and social services. A central component of the strategy is the management of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, and respiratory issues, with a focus on both preventive measures and personalized treatment plans. It underscores the importance of specialized geriatric care, addressing medical, psychological, and social needs to improve the overall quality of life for older adults.⁹

Preventive health measures are also a key aspect of the strategy, promoting healthy ageing through regular health screenings, vaccinations, and health education to mitigate age-related illnesses.

The strategy places a significant emphasis on mental health support, aiming to address issues such as depression and anxiety through dedicated counseling services. Additionally, the development and enhancement of older adult care facilities, including nursing homes and assisted living centers, are prioritized to ensure high standards of care and a supportive environment for long-term care.⁹

The framework also acknowledges the critical role of families and caregivers, providing them with training, resources, and respite care to support their caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, the strategy advocates for continuous research and innovation in elderly care, supporting the development of new technologies and practices to improve life quality for older adults. Although hearing loss is mentioned as a non-communicable disease (NCD), specific hearing or ear care strategies or screenings are not mentioned.⁹

Strategy 2022: Pension Reforms

Unveiled in 2018, Strategy 2022, also known as the National Industrial Strategy, is a comprehensive plan to diversify Saudi Arabia's industrial base with a focus on boosting local employment.¹⁰ As part of this strategy, pension reforms were introduced by the Public Pension Agency (PPA), including a commitment to partner with the private sector for special services for pensioners, improve pension administration through digitalization, and enhance investment and risk management for stronger financial performance.¹¹ A cornerstone of the new reform is the gradual increase in the statutory retirement age from 58 years to 65 years, reflecting longer life expectancy and aiming for pension system sustainability. The reform also raises the required contribution period for early retirement from 25 to 30 years and equalizes the retirement age for men and women, promoting gender equality and encouraging longer workforce participation while maintaining early retirement options under more sustainable conditions. Ear and Hearing Care services are not mentioned.¹²

National Dementia Care Strategies

Ministry of Health Protocol for the Prevention of Cognitive Impairment

Created in November 2023, the Ministry of Health's Protocol for the Prevention of Cognitive Impairment aims to offer tailored recommendations for individuals in Saudi Arabia concerning modifiable risk factors for dementia and enhance understanding of the condition, decrease stigma, and motivate people to seek medical help if they experience symptoms of dementia. The protocol was produced by experts, including geriatricians and cognitive behavioral neurologists. Guidelines to promote early detection and appropriate interventions can enhance outcomes for individuals with dementia. The protocol is set to be updated every two years or as new evidence arises. It serves as a flexible, evidence-based tool for healthcare professionals to manage dementia risk factors and delay onset of dementia. The recommendations are intended to complement, not replace, clinical judgement.⁶

Although there is no evidence supporting the screening of asymptomatic older adults for dementia, the MOH believes that every patient reporting potential cognitive symptoms deserve a baseline assessment. To support this, the MOH has made significant efforts to translate and validate internationally recognized screening neuropsychological and cognitive assessment tools such as the Mini-mental State Exam (MMSE) and the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA).^c

The protocol identifies several modifiable risk factors for dementia, including hearing loss, obesity, diabetes, and depression. It specifically highlights the relationship between ARHL and an increased risk of dementia, noting that each decibel of hearing loss can elevate this risk. Evidence indicates that the use of hearing aids can mitigate this risk, making it crucial to raise awareness among both the general population and healthcare providers about the significance of addressing hearing loss in older adults. The MOH suggests that older adults should promptly report any hearing loss or changes to their physicians, and in turn, physicians should routinely screen older adults for hearing loss.⁶

National Hearing Care Strategies

Ministry of Health Strategy

Published in 2024, The MOH Strategy aligns with the Kingdom's healthcare goals, as outlined in Council of Ministers' resolution from 2009. For the past 40 years, enhancing healthcare services for Saudi citizens, protecting public health, and provision of healthcare to all citizens, has been a strategic focus for the Kingdom's leadership. The strategy is informed by extensive research, consultations, and feedback. It supports the National Transition Program (NTP) under Saudi Vision 2030, aiming to address challenges and build institutional capacity. The MOH Strategy has been created to meet the future vision of healthcare in Saudi Arabia, considering global advancements in health services.¹³

The strategy responds to significant global and national healthcare challenges. These include rising expectations from the public for high-quality, accessible health services, as well as the increasing costs of healthcare due to advancements in medical technology and the development of expensive new drugs. The demand for healthcare services is also driven by the prevalence of NCDs, the need for long-term care, and greater health awareness among the population, which has led to increased requests for periodic checkups, risk monitoring, and early disease detection.¹³

To address these challenges, the MOH Strategy incorporates modern methodologies to create a patient-centered healthcare system. This approach prioritizes efficient, effective care from primary care to specialized treatments while respecting patient rights, including being informed, understanding options, choosing providers, and receiving compassionate care. This patient-centered approach is now a central objective of the strategy. The strategy also includes significant elements such as health insurance and cooperative health insurance programs. It proposes examining the inclusion of new community segments in insurance coverage and exploring potential privatization of MOH hospitals. Additionally, it calls for studying best management and operational practices, optimizing resource use, and diversifying funding sources. Although there is a focus on the prevention of NCDs, specialized treatments, and medical technology, this strategy does not specifically mention hearing or ear care initiatives.¹³

Universal Newborn Hearing Screening Programs

In Saudi Arabia, the UNHS program, operational since 2016, aims to enhance health threat prevention and reduce hearing loss-related rehabilitation costs. The program aims to screen all newborns in birthing hospitals, mandate hearing screenings at clinics, and ensure early diagnosis and intervention within six months.

Its goals include early detection, minimizing rehabilitation needs, integrating children into regular education if fitted early, and maintaining a case registry. It also seeks to address barriers to parental acceptance, increase audiologists and speech pathologists, and establish well-equipped hearing centers in major cities.^{7, 14}

The MOH is responsible for the UNHS programs across all hospitals in the country. Since 2016, 1 million newborns have been screened with a coverage rate of 96% and a referral/fail rate of 0.7% and in 2021, out of 214,971 births, 199,034 newborns were screened, achieving a coverage rate of 92.6% and a referral/fail rate of 1.87%. The 92.6% coverage rate is competitive with other countries but still below the recommended 95% target. However, the referral rate of 1.87% aligns with international standards and is an improvement from previous data.⁷

It is important to note that only MOH hospitals are included in the UNHS program, therefore efforts to include non-MOH hospitals and address regional disparities are ongoing. Additional challenges include securing parental acceptance and cooperation for follow-ups, addressing the shortage of qualified audiologists, and improving knowledge among primary care and clinic physicians about hearing loss screening and intervention. Solutions involve training programs, developing evaluation protocols, incentivizing audiologists, enhancing public awareness, and preparing for increased demand for qualified personnel.^{7, 14}

Civil Society Organization Engagement

Age Care-Related CSOs

The Saudi Older Adults Support Organization “WAQAR”

WAQAR is a leading charity organization dedicated to improving the lives of older adults in Saudi Arabia. Established in 2016 by parliament (Shura) members, medical professionals, academics, and others committed to elder care, WAQAR offers a range of services and facilities tailored to the needs of older adults. The organization strives to enhance the living environment for older adults by collaborating with various sectors and authorities to address their specific needs. WAQAR also conducts research on issues affecting older adults, providing actionable recommendations to regulators and coordinating with them to implement improvements. Additionally, the organization builds awareness and fosters community engagement by sharing valuable information about elder care through social media and other platforms. WAQAR is also involved in developing and implementing innovative programs to enhance the care and supports older adults in participating in volunteer projects that benefit the wider community.¹⁵ There is no mention of hearing or ear care-related initiatives.

Saudi Geriatrics Society

Founded in October 2017, the Saudi Geriatrics Society (SGS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the health and quality of life for older adults in Saudi Arabia. The SGS has quickly formed collaborations with key scientific and health bodies, including the Saudi Food & Drug Authority (SFDA), the Middle East Academy for Medicine of Ageing (MEAMA), the Saudi Society of Internal Medicine (SSIM), and the Saudi Older Adults Support Organization “WAQAR.”

SGS actively contributes to the Ministry of Health's Vision 2030 and is working on developing clinical policies and pathways in collaboration with various health institutes across the Kingdom. The society has organized numerous training courses for healthcare professionals and social workers in different cities, including specialized training with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD).¹⁵

There is no mention of hearing or ear care-related initiatives.

The National Home Health Care Foundation

Established in 1997, the National Home Health Care Foundation (NHHCF) specializes in providing and expanding home health care services across Saudi Arabia. With over 90% of its patients being older adults, the NHHCF is dedicated to enhancing both health and social awareness about elderly care at home. The foundation aims to improve health and social care for individuals with chronic diseases and to empower citizens in the home-based care of patients. It supports patient discharge from hospitals by providing essential medical equipment and collaborates with public hospitals to establish home health care centers, ensuring comprehensive care is available in patients' homes.¹⁵ There is no mention of hearing or ear care-related initiatives.

Dementia-Related CSOs

Saudi Alzheimer's Disease Association

The Saudi Alzheimer's Disease Association (SADA), established in 2009 and based in Riyadh with additional branches in Jeddah and the Eastern region, the association provides nationwide support for dementia care. Its mission is to enhance the quality of life for individuals with Alzheimer's and their families through a range of services. These include caregiver meetings, counseling, educational events, and training workshops. The association also collaborates with strategic partners across various sectors—healthcare, academia, technology, and media—to support initiatives such as providing medical beds, automatic wheelchairs, and wheelchair lift stands.¹⁶ There is no mention of hearing or ear care-related initiatives.

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Published January 2025 © IFA.NGO