

The top 10 causes of death

 [who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death)

In 2021, the top 10 causes of death accounted for 39 million deaths, or 57% of the total 68 million deaths worldwide.

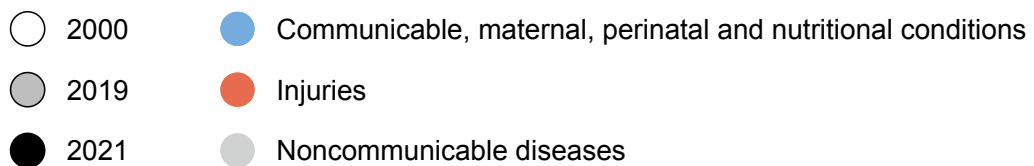
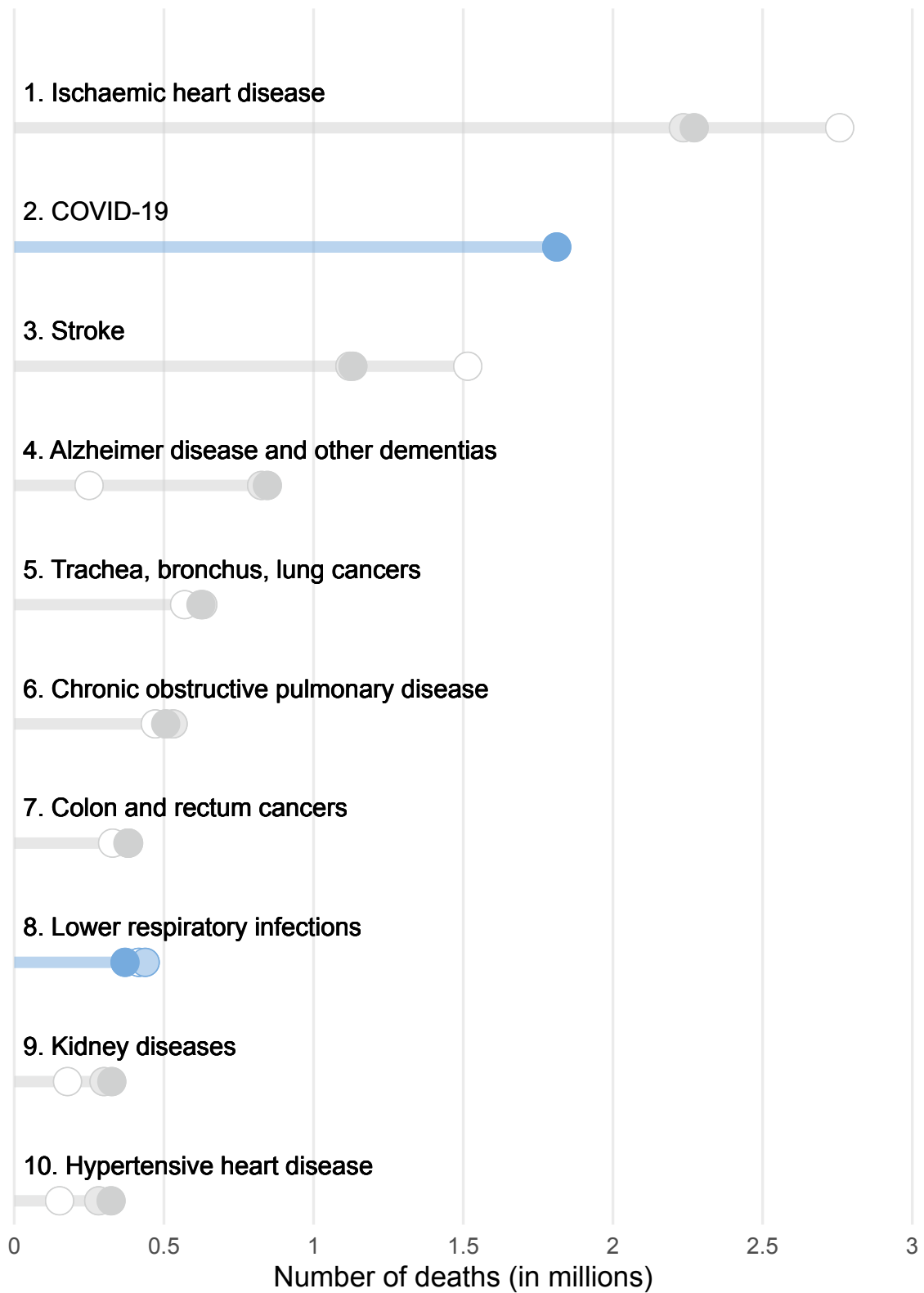
The top global causes of death, in order of total number of lives lost, are associated with two broad topics: cardiovascular (ischaemic heart disease, stroke) and respiratory (COVID-19, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lower respiratory infections), with COVID-19 emerging as the second leading causes of death globally.

Causes of death can be grouped into three categories: communicable (infectious and parasitic diseases and maternal, perinatal and nutritional conditions), noncommunicable (chronic) and injuries.

Leading causes of death globally

At a global level, 7 of the 10 leading causes of deaths in 2021 were noncommunicable diseases, accounting for 38% of all deaths, or 68% of the top 10 causes.

Leading causes of death in 2021 in high-income countries



In high-income countries, deaths are increasing for the majority of the top 10 diseases in 2000, primarily due to population ageing. Exceptionally, ischaemic heart disease, stroke and stomach cancer are among the causes of death in the top 10 for which the total numbers have gone down between 2000 and 2021 – by 15%, 18% and 19%, respectively. High-income is the only category of income group in which there have been decreasing numbers of deaths from these three diseases. Nonetheless ischaemic heart disease and stroke have remained in the top three causes of death for this income category, with a combined total of over 2.6 million fatalities in 2021. In addition, deaths from hypertensive heart disease are rising. Reflecting a global trend, this disease has more than doubled and risen from the sixteenth leading cause of death in 2000 to the tenth in 2021.

Deaths due to Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias have also increased dramatically, nearly four-fold since 2000. This became the fourth leading cause of death in high-income countries and is on track to overtake stroke as one of the top three.

COVID-19 claimed 1.2 million lives and ranked second in 2021 in high-income countries. As with upper-middle-income countries, only one other communicable disease – lower respiratory infections – appears in the top 10 causes of death.

Why do we need to know the reasons people die?

It is important to know why people die to improve how people live. Measuring how many people die each year helps to assess the effectiveness of our health systems and direct resources to where they are needed most. For example, mortality data can help focus activities and resource allocation in the health sector, as well as in other sectors such as transportation, food and agriculture, and the environment.

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance for countries investing in civil registration and vital statistics systems to allow daily counting of deaths and direct prevention and treatment efforts. It has also revealed inherent fragmentation in data collection systems in most low-income countries, where policy-makers still do not know with confidence how many people die and of what causes.

The World Health Organization develops standards and best practices for data collection, processing and synthesis through the consolidated and improved [International Classification of Diseases \(ICD-11\)](#). This digital platform facilitates reporting of timely and accurate data for causes of death for countries to routinely generate and use health information that conforms to international standards.

The routine collection and analysis of high-quality data on deaths and causes of death, as well as data on disability– disaggregated by age, sex and geographic location – is essential for improving health and reducing deaths and disability across the world.

Editor’s note

WHO's Global Health Estimates, from which the information in this fact sheet is extracted, present comprehensive and comparable health-related data, including life expectancy, healthy life expectancy, mortality and morbidity, and burden of diseases at global, regional and country levels disaggregated by age, sex and cause. The estimates released in 2024 report on trends for more than 160 diseases and injuries annually from 2000 to 2021.

References

1. The World Bank. World Bank Country and Lending Groups.
<https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>