The top 10 causes of death - Excerpt

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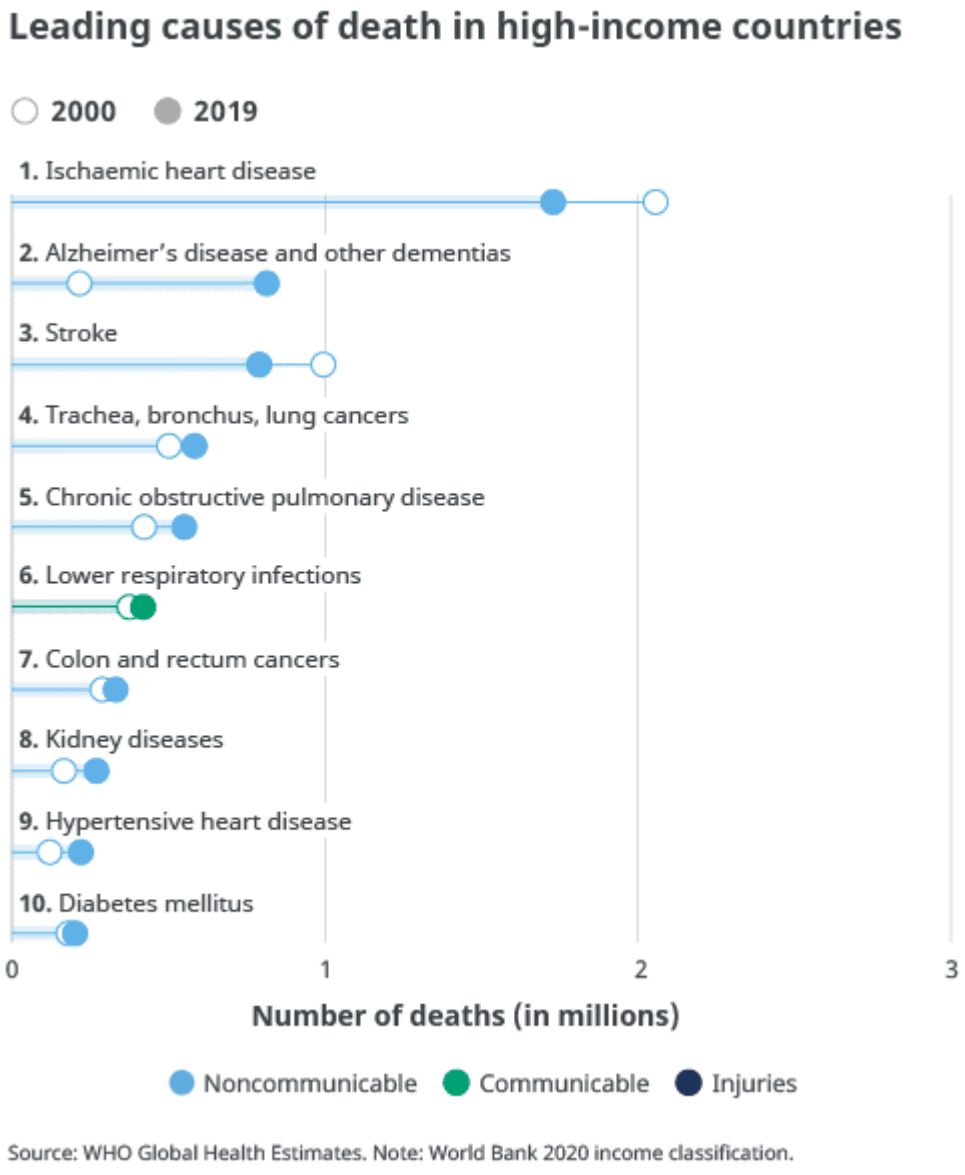
In 2019, the top 10 causes of death accounted for 55% of the 55.4 million deaths worldwide.

The top global causes of death, in order of total number of lives lost, are associated with three broad topics: cardiovascular (ischaemic heart disease, stroke), respiratory (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lower respiratory infections) and neonatal conditions –which include birth asphyxia and birth trauma, neonatal sepsis and infections, and preterm birth complications.

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



In high-income countries, deaths are increasing for all top 10 diseases except two. Ischaemic heart disease and stroke are the only causes of death in the top 10 for which the total numbers have gone down between 2000 and 2019, by 16% (or 327 000 deaths) and by 21%(or 205 000 deaths) respectively. High-income is the only category of income group in which there have been decreasing numbers of deaths from these two 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 2.5 million fatalities in 2019. In addition, deaths from hypertensive heart disease are rising. Reflecting a global trend, this disease has risen from the 18th leading cause of death to the 9th.

Deaths due to Alzheimer's disease and other dementias have increased, overtaking stroke to become the second leading cause in high-income countries, and being responsible for the deaths of 814 000 people in 2019. And, as with upper-middle-income countries, only one 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 among sectors such as transportation, food and agriculture, and the environment as well as health.

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance for countries to invest 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.

To address this critical gap, WHO has partnered with global actors to launch Revealing the Toll of COVID-19: Technical Package for Rapid Mortality Surveillance and Epidemic Response. By providing the tools and guidance for rapid mortality surveillance, countries can collect data on total number of deaths by day, week, sex, age and location, thus enabling health leaders to trigger more timely efforts for improvements to health.

Furthermore, 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) – a digital platform that 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 2020 report on trends for more than 160 diseases and injuries annually from 2000 to 2019.