



# THE TOP TEN CAUSES OF DEATH

## The 10 leading causes of death by broad income group, 2004

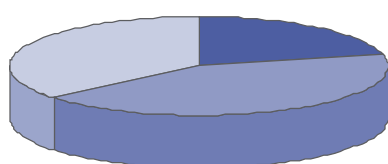
Low-income countries	Deaths in millions	% of deaths
Lower respiratory infections	2.94	11.2
Coronary heart disease	2.47	9.4
Diarrhoeal diseases	1.81	6.9
HIV/AIDS	1.51	5.7
Stroke and other cerebrovascular diseases	1.48	5.6
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	0.94	3.6
Tuberculosis	0.91	3.5
Neonatal infections	0.90	3.4
Malaria	0.86	3.3
Prematurity and low birth weight	0.84	3.2

Middle-income countries	Deaths in millions	% of deaths
Stroke and other cerebrovascular disease	3.47	14.2
Coronary heart disease	3.40	13.9
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	1.80	7.4
Lower respiratory infection	0.92	3.8
Trachea, bronchus, lung cancers	0.69	2.9
Road traffic accidents	0.67	2.8
Hypertensive heart disease	0.62	2.5
Stomach cancer	0.55	2.2
Tuberculosis	0.54	2.2
Diabetes mellitus	0.52	2.1

High-income countries	Deaths in millions	% of deaths
Coronary heart disease	1.33	16.3
Stroke and other cerebrovascular diseases	0.76	9.3
Trachea, bronchus, lung cancers	0.48	5.9
Lower respiratory infections	0.31	3.8
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	0.29	3.5
Alzheimer and other dementias	0.28	3.4
Colon and rectum cancers	0.27	3.3
Diabetes mellitus	0.22	2.8
Breast cancer	0.16	2.0
Stomach cancer	0.14	1.8

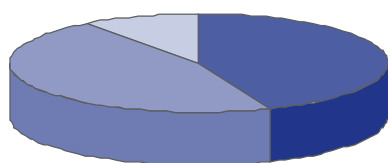
World	Deaths in millions	% of deaths
Coronary heart disease	7.20	12.2
Stroke and other cerebrovascular diseases	5.71	9.7
Lower respiratory infections	4.18	7.1
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	3.02	5.1
Diarrhoeal diseases	2.16	3.7
HIV/AIDS	2.04	3.5
Tuberculosis	1.46	2.5
Trachea, bronchus, lung cancers	1.32	2.3
Road traffic accidents	1.27	2.2
Prematurity and low birth weight	1.18	2.0

## Death distribution by age and income



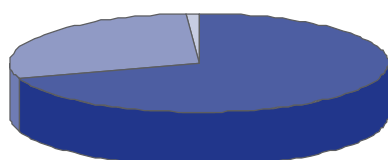
### Low-income countries:

21%  
43%  
36%



### Middle-income countries:

44%  
46%  
10%



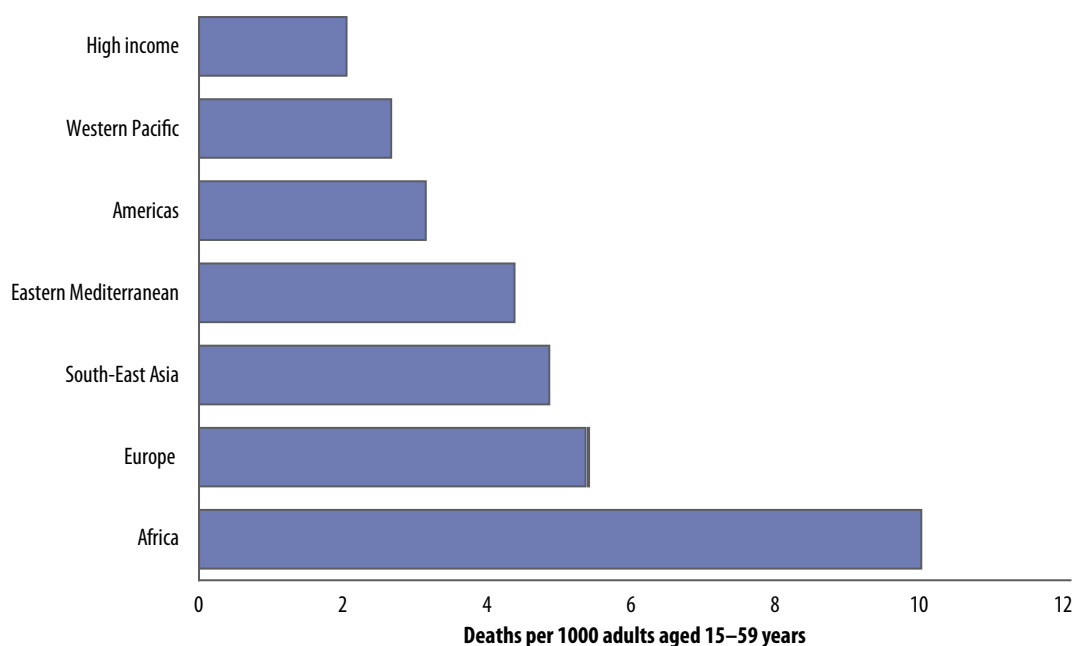
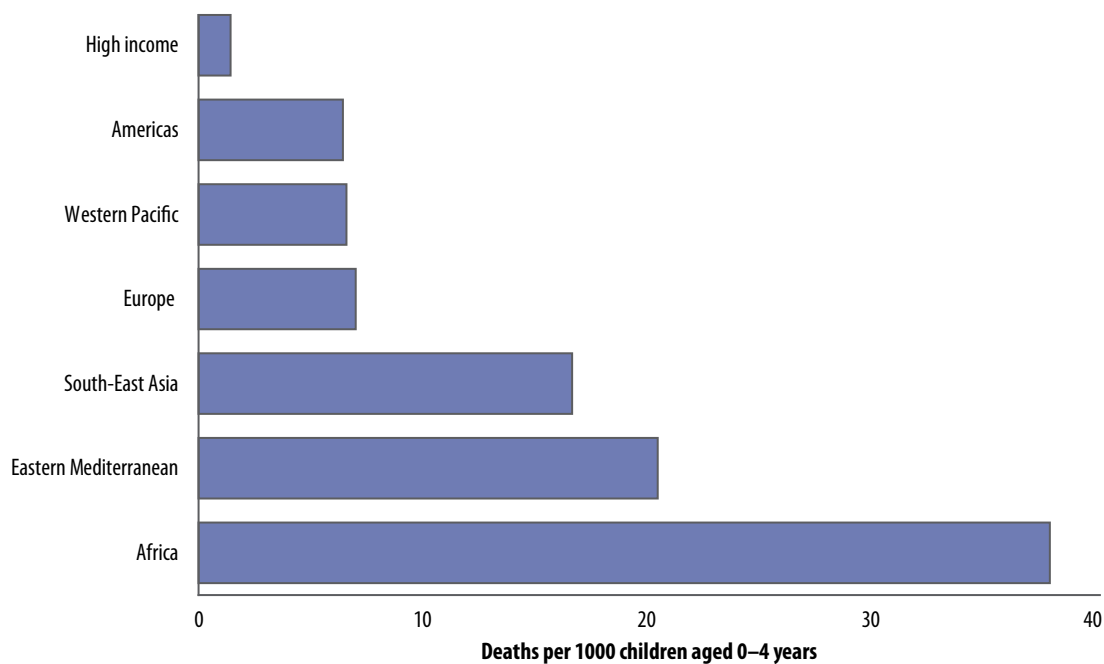
### High-income countries:

70%  
29%  
1%

Deaths among people over 70
  Deaths among people 15–69
  Deaths among people 0–14

## Deaths among children and adults: an imbalanced picture

The figures below present estimates for six WHO regions, with the high-income countries from each region separated off as a seventh group. Regional and income groupings are defined in [The global burden of disease 2004 update](#).



## Major causes of death: a primer

### Q: How many people die every year?

During 2004, an estimated 59 million people died.

### Q: What is the number one cause of death throughout the world?

Cardiovascular diseases kill more people every year than any others. In 2004, 7.2 million people died of coronary heart disease, 5.7 million from stroke or another form of cerebrovascular disease.

### Q: Isn't smoking a top cause of death?

Tobacco use is a major cause of many of the world's top killer diseases –including cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive lung disease and lung cancer. In total, tobacco use is responsible for the death of almost one in 10 adults worldwide. Smoking is often the hidden cause of the disease recorded as responsible for death.

### Q: What are the main differences between rich and poor countries with respect to causes of death?

In high-income countries more than two thirds of all people live beyond the age of 70 and predominantly die of chronic diseases: cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive lung disease, cancers, diabetes or dementia. Lung infection remains the only leading infectious cause of death.

In middle-income countries, nearly half of all people live to the age of 70 and chronic diseases are the major killers, just as they are in high-income countries. Unlike in high-income countries, however, tuberculosis and road traffic accidents also are leading causes of death.

In low-income countries less than a quarter of all people reach the age of 70, and more than a third of all deaths are among children under 14. People predominantly die of infectious diseases: lung infections, diarrhoeal diseases, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Complications of pregnancy and childbirth together continue to be leading causes of death, claiming the lives of both infants and mothers.

### Q: How many young children die every year?

More than 10 million deaths in 2004 were among children under five years of age, and 99% of them were in low- and middle-income countries.

## Why counting the dead matters

Measuring how many people die each year and why they have died is one of the most important means –along with gauging how various diseases and injuries are affecting the living– for assessing the effectiveness of a country's health system. Having those numbers helps health authorities determine whether they are focusing on the right kinds of public health actions. A country where deaths from heart disease and diabetes rapidly rise over a period of a few years, for example, has a strong interest in starting a vigorous programme to encourage lifestyles that will help prevent these illnesses. Similarly, if a country recognizes that many children are dying of malaria, but only a small portion of the health budget is dedicated to providing effective treatment, an adjustment can be made.

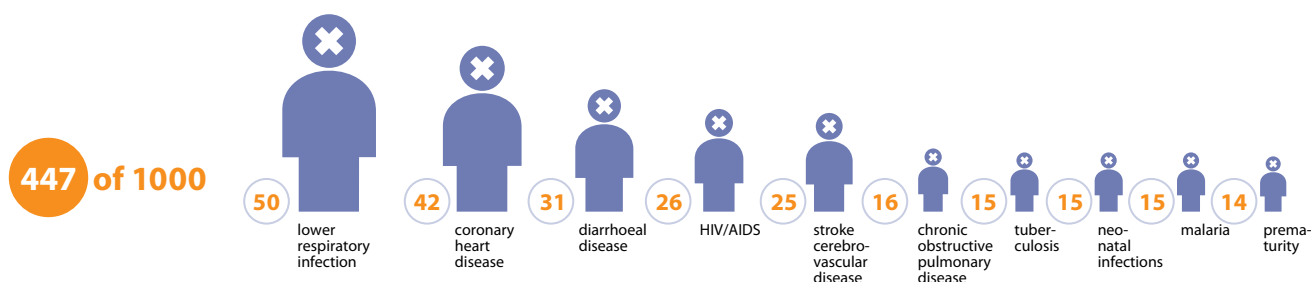
Industrialized countries have systems in place for assessing causes of death in the population. Most developing countries do not have such systems, and the numbers of deaths from specific causes have to be estimated from incomplete data. It is widely acknowledged that progress in this realm is crucial for improving health and reducing preventable deaths in the developing world.

## Deaths across the globe: an overview

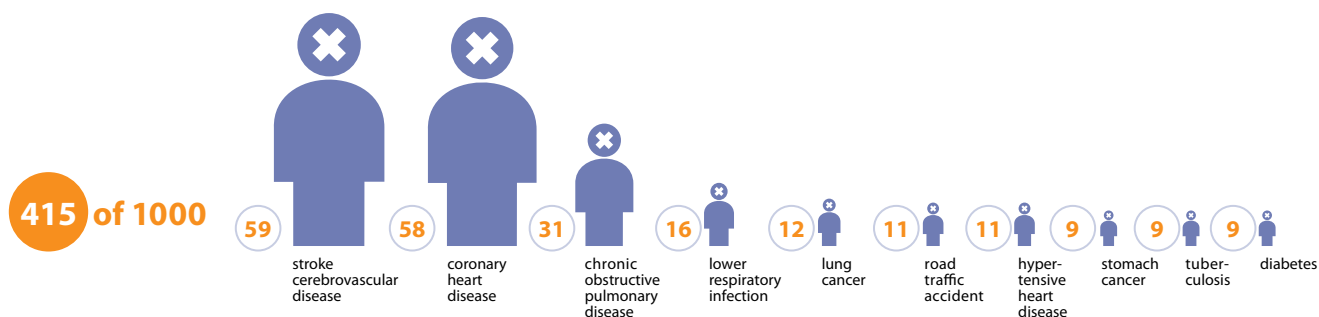
Imagine a diverse international group of 1000 individuals representative of the women, men and children from all over the globe who died in 2004. Of those 1000 people, 138 would have come from high-income countries, 415 from middle-income countries and 447 from low-income countries.

### What would be the top 10 causes of their deaths?

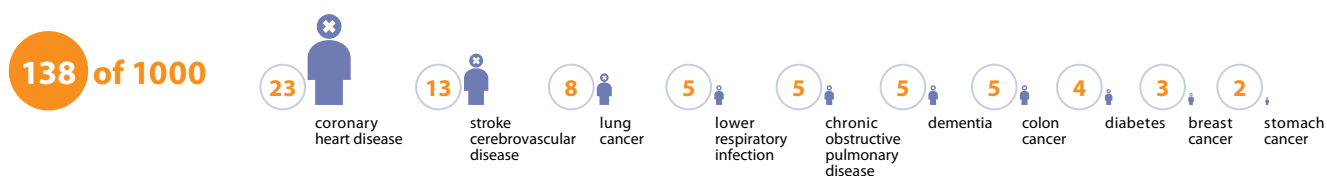
#### Low-income countries



#### Middle-income countries



#### High-income countries



**Note:** In this fact sheet, we use low-, middle- and high-income categories as defined by the World Bank. Countries are grouped based on their 2004 gross national income. See [The global burden of disease 2004 update](#) for more information.