

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease which occurs when changes in a group of normal cells within the body lead to an uncontrolled, abnormal growth forming a lump called a tumour; this is true of all cancers except leukaemia (cancer of the blood). If left untreated, tumours can grow and spread into the surrounding normal tissue, or to other parts of the body via the bloodstream and lymphatic systems, and can affect the digestive, nervous and circulatory systems or release hormones that may affect body function.

Global cancer facts

- Cancer is the **second-leading cause** of death worldwide.
- The International Agency for Research on Cancer estimates that one-in-five men and one-in-six women worldwide will develop cancer over the course of their lifetime, and that one-in-eight men and one-in-eleven women will die from their disease. This equates to **an estimated 19.3 million new cases and 10 million people dying from cancer in 2020**.
- By 2040, the number of new cancer cases worldwide are expected to rise to **30 million**.
- Genetic mutations play a role in **5-10% of cancers**.
- **Over 40%** of cancer deaths (4.4 million) worldwide are caused by modifiable – and therefore preventable – risk factors (e.g. alcohol consumption, tobacco use, high body mass index).
- The responsibility for reducing these risk factors has often been placed on consumers, stigmatising individual behaviour, while the commercial interests of the producers of tobacco, alcohol, unhealthy food and other products linked to cancer also drive consumption; public health has a role to play in reducing the harms created by these commercial determinants of health by creating a more favourable environment for individuals to engage in healthier behaviours. (**“Public Health Roles in Addressing Commercial Determinants of Health”**, *Annual Review of Public Health*, April 2022)
- As survival rates for cancer increase significantly the earlier the cancer is detected and treatment begins, it is estimated that an additional to **3.7 million lives could be saved each year** by implementing resource-appropriate strategies for prevention, including vaccinations, early detection and timely treatment, particularly for common cancers such as breast, cervical, colorectal and prostate, **which account for** nearly one-third of all cancer cases and over one-third of all cancer deaths worldwide. (*See WHO cancer prevention facts*).

- Approximately **70% of all cancer deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries** (LMICs). These countries are least well placed to deliver the services needed by people living with cancer or manage the social or economic consequences of this burden.
- The total economic cost of cancer has been estimated at **USD 1.16 trillion**. This translates into a loss of productivity and household income, reduction of quality of life, disability, and ultimately premature death.

See UICC's dedicated thematic webpages

- [Access to essential cancer medicines](#)
- [Breast cancer](#)
- [Cancer and ageing](#)
- [Cancer control planning](#)
- [Cervical cancer](#)
- [Universal Health Coverage](#)