

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 (WHO/IARC)

- Cancer is the **second-leading cause** of death worldwide.
- About 1 in 5 people develop cancer in their lifetime. Approximately 1 in 9 men and 1 in 12 women die from the disease.
- Over 35 million new cancer cases are predicted in 2050, a 77% increase from the estimated 20 million cases in 2022.
- In 2022, 9.7 million people died from cancer. For men, cancer deaths are projected to reach 10.5 million in 2050, a 93.2% increase from the. For women, cancer deaths is projected to reach 8 million, an 85.2% increase from the 2022.
- Lung cancer is the most commonly occurring cancer worldwide with 2.5 million new cases accounting for 12.4% of the total new cases. Female breast cancer ranked second (2.3 million cases, 11.6%), followed by colorectal cancer (1.9 million cases, 9.6%), prostate cancer (1.5 million cases, 7.3%), and stomach cancer (970 000 cases, 4.9%).
- Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death (1.8 million deaths, 18.7% of the total cancer deaths), followed by colorectal cancer (900 000 deaths, 9.3%), liver cancer (760 000 deaths, 7.8%), breast cancer (670 000 deaths, 6.9%) and stomach cancer (660 000 deaths, 6.8%).
- **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)

- It is estimated that an additional **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.
- This is particularly true for breast cancer. In countries with a very high human development index (HDI), 1 in 12 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime and 1 in 71 women die of it. By contrast, in countries with a low HDI, while only one in 27 women is diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime, one in 48 women will die from it.
- 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

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- [Breast cancer](#)
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