

Unveiling the Primary Contributors to Mortality in the African Region

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The African Region is known for its rich cultural heritage, stunning landscapes, and a rapidly growing population. However, like many other regions, Africa faces health challenges. [According to a recent factsheet developed by the ARD Cluster DAK team in the WHO African Region](#), understanding the leading causes of death in the African Region is crucial for addressing public health issues and improving healthcare systems. In this blog, we will explore the leading causes of death and shed light on the most significant health challenges facing the African Region today.

The situation of Mortality in the African Region

Africa is a vast and diverse continent with over 1.3 billion people. Mortality rates across the Region vary significantly by country. The number of deaths in the African Region has fallen over the last two decades. [It fell from about 8.7 million deaths in 2000 to 7.79 million in 2019](#), indicating a decrease of 10%. In addition, the region suffered the least health impact (linked to mortality) from the COVID-19 crisis.

Rank	Cause	Deaths (000s)	% of total deaths
0	All Causes	7,786	100.0
1	Neonatal conditions	880	11.3
2	Lower respiratory infections	774	9.9
3	Diarrhoeal diseases	496	6.4
4	HIV/AIDS	435	5.6
5	Ischaemic heart disease	429	5.5
6	Stroke	426	5.5
7	Malaria	388	5.0
8	Tuberculosis	378	4.9
9	Road injury	297	3.8
10	Cirrhosis of the liver	195	2.5

Top 10 Leading cause of death in the WHO African Region in 2019

diseases, accounting for 11.3%, 9.9%, and 6.4% of all fatalities, respectively. Furthermore, road traffic injuries, with approximately 297,000 deaths, were estimated to be the ninth leading cause of death in the region in 2019.

Highlighting the Top ten leading causes of Death in the African Region

Understanding the leading causes of death in the African Region is a critical step toward improving public health. While these statistics highlight ongoing challenges, they underscore the importance of targeted interventions, healthcare infrastructure development, and community education. By addressing these leading causes of mortality, we can work towards a healthier and more prosperous future for the African Region.

In 2019, children under five in the African Region represented more than a third of all recorded deaths. [Additionally, there has been a noticeable shift towards noncommunicable diseases causing a larger portion of fatalities, increasing from 24.1% in 2000 to 37.1% in 2019.](#) Among the primary causes of death in the African Region that year, neonatal conditions ranked the highest, followed closely by lower respiratory infections and diarrheal

Neonatal Conditions: Tragically, neonatal conditions were the most significant cause of death in the [African Region in 2019, claiming 11.3% of lives](#). These conditions encompass a variety of issues that affect newborns, including preterm birth complications, birth asphyxia, and infections. Improving maternal and neonatal healthcare access and quality is essential to reducing these devastating losses.



Lower Respiratory Infections: Lower respiratory infections, such as pneumonia, were responsible for [regional deaths](#). These infections often strike vulnerable populations, including young children and the elderly. Vaccination campaigns, better nutrition, and improved hygiene practices can help reduce the prevalence and impact of such infections.

Diarrheal Diseases: Diarrheal diseases accounted for [6.4% of deaths in 2019](#), primarily affecting children under five. Access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and education on hygiene practices are key factors in preventing these often-preventable deaths.

HIV/AIDS: While significant progress has been made in the fight against HIV/AIDS, it still contributes to [5.6% of deaths in the African Region](#). Ongoing efforts to increase access to antiretroviral therapy, promote safe sexual practices, and reduce stigma are essential to combating this epidemic.

Ischemic Heart Disease: Ischemic means that an organ (e.g., the heart) is not getting enough blood and oxygen. Ischemic heart disease, [also called coronary heart disease \(CHD\) or coronary artery disease](#), is the term for heart problems caused by narrowed heart (coronary) arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle. Ischemic heart disease, which includes conditions like heart attacks, [accounted for 5.5% of deaths](#). Lifestyle factors like diet and physical activity play a role here, highlighting the need for better cardiovascular health education and improved access to healthcare.

Stroke: This [is a neurological deficit of cerebrovascular cause that persists](#) beyond 24 hours or is interrupted by death within 24 hours. Stroke, like heart disease, was responsible [for 5.5% of deaths](#). Timely treatment and risk factor management, including hypertension control, can help mitigate the impact of this condition.



Malaria: Malaria remains a significant health threat in Africa, [causing 5.0% of deaths](#). Prevention measures, such as bed nets, indoor residual spraying, and effective treatments, are critical in the ongoing fight against this mosquito-borne disease.

Tuberculosis: Tuberculosis (TB) remains a persistent issue, [claiming 4.9% of lives](#). Wider access to TB screening, diagnostics, and treatment is crucial to reduce TB-related deaths.

Road Injury: Road traffic injuries were the ninth leading cause of death in the African Region, with [approximately 297,000 fatalities in 2019](#). Improved road safety measures, awareness campaigns, and emergency response systems are essential to curbing this preventable cause of death.



Cirrhosis of the Liver: Cirrhosis of the liver, often linked to alcohol abuse and viral hepatitis, [accounted for 2.5% of deaths](#). Encouraging healthier lifestyles, addressing alcohol-related issues, and expanding access to hepatitis vaccinations and treatments can help lower these numbers.

WHO response

WHO Member States established a global action plan to combat non-communicable diseases (NCDs) from 2013 to 2020. The plan aims to reduce premature NCD-related deaths by 25% by 2025 through nine voluntary global targets, specifically focusing on cardiovascular diseases (CVDs). These targets include reducing the global prevalence of high blood pressure by 25% between 2010 and 2025, ensuring that at least 50% of eligible individuals receive drug therapy and counseling to prevent heart attacks and strokes by 2025, and ensuring 80% availability of affordable essential technologies and medicines for NCD treatment.

Around seven countries in the Region collect mortality data with causes of death according to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). This low level of data does not provide good quality national data for better estimates of the main causes of death in the Region. Most of the data used for the moment comes from estimates based on international models which do not always consider all the specific regional and national characteristics. This is therefore a major challenge that our health information systems must work to solve, and one that necessarily involves better collaboration between the various players in the vital statistics system, as well as the implementation of robust processes for registering deaths and causes of death in the countries.

For more information, visit.

[The Regional Analytical Factsheet on Mortality](#)

[The global health estimates for 2000-2019](#)

[National Library of Medicine](#)