

The Top Ten

Heart disease, cancer, Covid, & injuries are leading killers

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“Life expectancy in the U.S. dropped for the second year in a row in 2021,” reported the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in August.¹

The decline—from roughly 77 years to 76 years—brought us back to our 1996 level. (Our life expectancy of 76 is an average of age 73 for men and age 79 for women.) Covid was the main culprit, though deaths due to “unintentional injuries” also climbed, thanks in part to a rise in fentanyl and other synthetic opioid overdoses.

That said, diet and exercise clearly play a role in five of the top ten killers: heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and kidney disease. (Tobacco, of course, is still the leading cause of cancer.) And a healthy diet and exercise may lower the risk of dementia due to silent strokes or other damage to the brain’s blood vessels, which is often diagnosed as Alzheimer’s.

In 2019 (pre-Covid), life expectancy in 39 countries was higher than it was in the U.S. (78½ years, at the time).² In Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and several other countries, the average person lived to 82 or more. Clearly, we can do better. 📌

Leading Causes of Death in 2020 (Deaths per age group)

Rank	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75–84	85+	ALL AGES
1	Unintentional Injuries 31,315	Unintentional Injuries 31,057	Cancer 34,589	Cancer 110,243	Cancer 175,464	Heart Disease 167,346	Heart Disease 254,492	Heart Disease 696,962
2	Suicide 8,454	Heart Disease 12,177	Heart Disease 34,169	Heart Disease 88,551	Heart Disease 134,827	Cancer 162,876	Covid-19 109,529	Cancer 602,350
3	Homicide 7,125	Cancer 10,730	Unintentional Injuries 27,819	Covid-19 42,090	Covid-19 76,277	Covid-19 97,030	Cancer 102,413	Covid-19 350,831
4	Heart Disease 3,984	Suicide 7,314	Covid-19 16,964	Unintentional Injuries 28,915	COPD & Emphysema 38,559	COPD & Emphysema 49,363	Alzheimer’s Disease 85,713	Unintentional Injuries 200,955
5	Cancer 3,573	Covid-19 6,079	Liver Disease 9,503	COPD & Emphysema 18,816	Diabetes 27,213	Stroke 43,252	Stroke 67,777	Stroke 160,264
6	Covid-19 2,254	Liver Disease 4,938	Diabetes 7,546	Diabetes 18,002	Stroke 26,363	Alzheimer’s Disease 37,728	COPD & Emphysema 40,790	COPD & Emphysema 152,657
7	Liver Disease 1,631	Homicide 4,482	Suicide 7,249	Liver Disease 16,151	Unintentional Injuries 18,609	Diabetes 25,445	Unintentional Injuries 25,541	Alzheimer’s Disease 134,242
8	Diabetes 1,168	Diabetes 2,904	Stroke 5,686	Stroke 14,153	Liver Disease 11,895	Unintentional Injuries 18,646	Diabetes 19,536	Diabetes 102,188
9	Stroke 600	Stroke 2,008	COPD & Emphysema 3,538	Suicide 7,160	Kidney Disease 11,461	Parkinson’s Disease 17,323	Influenza & Pneumonia 18,219	Influenza & Pneumonia 53,544
10	Complicated Pregnancy 594	Influenza & Pneumonia 1,148	Homicide 2,542	Influenza & Pneumonia 6,295	Influenza & Pneumonia 10,460	Kidney Disease 14,696	Hypertension 16,663	Kidney Disease 52,547

Source: wisqars.cdc.gov/fatal-leading. ¹cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/20220831.htm. ²who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/life-expectancy-at-birth-(years). Notes: COPD is chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Hypertension can be lethal, but it is more often an underlying cause of stroke, heart disease, or heart failure. Data for more recent years is not yet available.