

The Ups and Downs of Living Longer



People are living longer, but long-term sickness has increased too.

From VOA Learning English, this is the Health Report in Special English.

A new study says people are living longer, but many are living longer in poor health. Researchers found that life expectancy has increased by about five years since 1990. On average, men worldwide can expect to live 67 and a half years. Women can expect to live to age 73.

Almost 500 researchers in 50 countries took part in the study of global disease and disability. The findings appear in a series of articles in the Lancet. Richard Horton is the medical journal's editor-in-chief.

"All of us in the world of health focus on diseases and often bad news. Actually, the Global Burden of Disease 2010 Study broadly presents very good news."

The research found that far fewer people died of measles, tetanus, respiratory problems and diarrheal diseases in 2010 than in 1990. Deaths from infections, childbirth-related problems and malnutrition fell about 17 percent to 13.2 million.

Global efforts have focused on reducing HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

HIV/AIDS deaths have dropped since 2006, and TB deaths fell almost 20 percent since 1990. But each of these diseases still kills more than a million people every year. The number of malaria deaths increased by an estimated 20 percent, to almost 1.2 million in 2010.

"Those three big, big diseases are not just going to go away."

Mike Cohen is the head of global health research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was not involved in the research, but says it shows a change taking place worldwide.

"As infectious diseases have been better controlled and people live longer, and as their diets change and lifestyles change, the inevitable consequence in health is, you have to deal much more broadly with hypertension, heart disease, diabetes."

The study found that these kinds of non-communicable diseases caused more than half of the global burden of disease in 2010.

The two biggest killers -- heart disease and stroke -- caused one-fourth of all deaths in 2010. That was up from one-fifth in 1990.

There was a 48 percent increase in the number of deaths from lung cancer, which is commonly caused by smoking tobacco.

The top causes of disability in 2010 were physical conditions like arthritis and back problems, and mental and behavioral problems like depression, anxiety and substance abuse. Harvard University professor Joshua Salomon was a co-author of the disability research.

"I think in general we've been more successful at reducing mortality and less successful at actually addressing chronic disability."