



News Release

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Almost half of all deaths in Washington are preventable

About 16,000 deaths are due to smoking, physical inactivity, poor diet

OLYMPIA — In Washington, there were 45,244 deaths in 2002. About half of these deaths are due to causes that can be prevented. Almost 16,000 deaths – three-quarters of preventable deaths – are caused by smoking, lack of physical activity, and poor eating habits, the Department of Health reported today.

“When a death certificate is marked cancer or heart disease, the ‘actual’ cause of death is often tobacco use, lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, or alcohol abuse,” said Secretary of Health Mary Selecky. “The good news is that many of these deaths are from causes that are preventable. Educating people is not enough. We need policies and environments that allow people to make healthy choices.”

A report published in the [March 10, 2004](http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/vol291/issue10/index.dtl), Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) detailed actual causes of death nationally, and patterns in Washington are similar (<http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/vol291/issue10/index.dtl>). Nationally and in Washington, obesity is on the rise and is likely to surpass tobacco as the top cause of death. Adult obesity rates in Washington doubled from 1990 to 2000 and continue to increase. Obesity increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, arthritis, and cancer.

Other factors cited in the JAMA article are alcohol abuse, infections, toxic agents, motor vehicle crashes, illicit drugs, firearms, and sexual behavior. Poverty, low education, and poor access to medical care are also contributors. “Behavior is strongly influenced by social and economic factors. It’s difficult to eat a healthy diet if you cannot afford fruits and vegetables,” said Dr. Juliet VanEenwyk, state epidemiologist for non-infectious conditions.

Actual causes of death in Washington and prevention tips

Number 1: Tobacco use causes heart and lung disease, cancer, and strokes, contributing to about 8,000 annual deaths in Washington. Quitting smoking has health benefits no matter how old a person is, or how long he or she has been smoking. Smoke-free workplaces, schools, and public buildings serve to motivate smokers to quit and protect others from second-hand smoke. For information about quitting smoking, call the Quit Line, toll-free: 1-877-270-STOP or go to the Web page at quitline.com.

Number 2: Lack of physical activity and poor eating habits contribute to rising rates of obesity and are associated with many health problems and lower quality of life. People need a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, such as a brisk walk, at least five days a week. Healthy eating includes having at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, limiting animal (saturated) fats, and not eating too much. (Information about [overweight/obesity](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm) is online: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm>)

Number 3: Alcohol abuse was the third leading cause of death in Washington, accounting for over 2,500 deaths, or almost 6 percent of all deaths. Heavy drinking contributes to heart and liver disease, and violent and unintentional deaths. If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation: no more than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women. One drink means 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces (one shot) of hard liquor. For help with alcohol dependency, call – 1-800-562-1240.

Number 4: Infections (not including HIV) were the fourth leading cause of death, accounting about 1,600 deaths, or 4 percent of all deaths. Over half of these deaths were due to flu and pneumonia. Keep from spreading infections by sneezing or coughing into a tissue, washing your hands frequently, and staying home when you're sick. Also, talk to your health care provider about which vaccinations are right for you. For more information, a [fact sheet](http://www.doh.wa.gov/FluNews/health_manners_public_final.pdf) is available online (http://www.doh.wa.gov/FluNews/health_manners_public_final.pdf).

Other preventable causes of death

Toxic agents in Washington most likely caused at least 1,000 deaths. These are estimates because it is difficult to link exposure to specific toxic agents to deaths. Toxic agents are substances such as asbestos, benzene, radon, lead, and other contaminants in food, water, soil, and air. Air pollution accounts for the majority of deaths related to toxic agents and most air pollution in Washington comes from motor vehicles. We can all help to decrease air pollution by limiting our driving and the time we let motor vehicles idle.

Motor vehicles caused about 700 deaths, including crashes involving pedestrians and bicyclists. Being an alert driver, using seat belts and child restraints, not drinking and driving, obeying the speed limit, and wearing a helmet when bicycling could prevent such deaths.

Illicit drug use is estimated to cause between 300 and 700 deaths. These deaths include accidental poisonings, suicides, and infections such as HIV and hepatitis that can spread when contaminated needles are used. For help with drug addiction recovery, call 1-800-562-1240.

Firearms were involved in almost 600 deaths. Three-quarters of firearm deaths were suicides and nearly a quarter were homicides. Warning signs for suicide include depression, especially combined with substance abuse. For more information, contact the [Youth Suicide Prevention Program](http://www.yspp.org/warningSigns/warningSigns.htm) (<http://www.yspp.org/warningSigns/warningSigns.htm>). Firearms should always be stored unloaded and locked.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) may cause up to 200 deaths. Unsafe sex can result in serious infections including hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, and human papilloma virus, which can lead to cervical cancer. It is important for those at risk to have access to screening, counseling and medical care. Comprehensive sex education programs for youth have been shown to be effective in delaying sexual activity and in increasing use of condoms once sexual activity has begun.

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