



The impact of chronic disease

Chronic diseases are the leading cause of ill health, disability and death in Australia. The effects of chronic disease can be profound, both on an individual's health and wellbeing, and on the health care system.

What is chronic disease?

The term 'chronic disease' refers to a broad group of conditions, illnesses and diseases. Chronic diseases are usually characterised by their long-lasting effects—once present, they often persist throughout a person's life, and can lead to functional limitations and disability.

Chronic diseases can range from mild conditions such as short- and long-sightedness, mild dental decay and minor hearing loss, to debilitating arthritis and low back pain, to life-threatening heart disease and cancers.

Who suffers from chronic disease?

Half of Australians are affected by at least one of eight selected chronic diseases:

- arthritis
- asthma
- back pain and problems
- cancer
- cardiovascular disease
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- diabetes
- mental health conditions.

Quick facts

In 2014–15, more than **11 million** Australians had at least one of eight selected chronic diseases.

Chronic diseases are associated with:

- more than **7 in 10** deaths
- around **1 in 3** problems managed in general practice
- more than **1 in 3** potentially preventable hospitalisations.

Almost **1 in 3** (29%) people aged 65 and over report having three or more chronic diseases, compared with 2.4% of people aged under 45.

What are the most common chronic diseases?

The top three chronic diseases reported by Australians are cardiovascular disease (18%), mental health conditions (18%) and back pain and problems (16%). However, this varies by age:

- mental health conditions (16%) and asthma (11%) were the most common chronic diseases for people aged under 45
- cardiovascular disease (27%) and arthritis (26%) were the most common chronic diseases for people aged 45–64, and also for people aged 65 and over (59% and 51%, respectively).

	Age group			Sex		
	0–44	45–64	64+	Males	Females	People
1	Mental health conditions	Cardiovascular disease	Cardiovascular disease	Cardiovascular disease	Mental health conditions	Cardiovascular disease
2	Asthma	Arthritis	Arthritis	Back pain and problems	Cardiovascular disease	Mental health conditions
3	Back pain and problems	Back pain and problems	Back pain and problems	Mental health conditions	Arthritis	Back pain and problems
4	Cardiovascular disease	Mental health conditions	Mental health conditions	Arthritis	Back pain and problems	Arthritis
5	Arthritis	Asthma	Diabetes	Asthma	Asthma	Asthma

Most common selected chronic diseases, by age and sex, 2014–15



The rate of chronic disease is highest for:



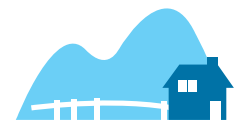
People aged 65 and over (87%) compared with people aged 0–44 (35%).



Females (52%) compared with males (48%).



People in the lowest socioeconomic areas (55%) compared with those in the highest socioeconomic areas (47%).



People living in *Regional* and *Remote* areas (54%) compared with those in *Major cities* (48%).

Measuring disease prevalence alone does not give a complete picture of the impact of chronic disease. For example, indications are that some chronic diseases may be under-reported because they have fewer treatment options, high mortality rates or remain undiagnosed until the disease has progressed to a life-threatening stage.

About comorbidity

Comorbidity refers to the occurrence of two or more conditions or diseases in a person at one time. Chronic conditions often occur together—and nearly one-quarter of us (23%, or 5.3 million people) have two or more of the eight selected chronic conditions.

The rate was higher for:

- people aged 65 and over (60%) compared with people aged 0–44 (9.7%)
- females (25%) compared with males (21%)
- people in the lowest socioeconomic areas (30%) compared with those in the highest socioeconomic areas (19%)
- people living in *Regional* and *Remote* areas (28%) compared with those in *Major cities* (21%).

The most common combination—or comorbidity—is arthritis with cardiovascular disease (7.4%), followed by arthritis with back pain and problems (5.1%), and back pain and problems with cardiovascular disease (5.0%).

Some chronic diseases may act as a precursor or as a risk factor for other chronic diseases. For example, having diabetes is known to be a risk factor for developing

cardiovascular disease, and people with asthma are at greater risk of developing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease later in life.

Understanding more about comorbidities can provide important information for the prevention, management and treatment of chronic disease.

What are the risk factors?

The onset of chronic disease is linked to a number of behavioural and biomedical risk factors that are largely preventable. Behavioural risk factors include smoking, physical inactivity, poor nutrition, risky alcohol consumption and illicit drug use. Biomedical risk factors, which are often influenced by behavioural risk factors, include overweight and obesity, high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol.

How big is the burden of disease?

Burden of disease here refers to a method of combining the effect a disease has on reducing the quality of life due to living with a disease or injury, with the effect on reducing the quantity of life due to dying prematurely—that is, it counts years of healthy life lost. Since chronic diseases are responsible for the greatest amount of illness and death, it is not surprising that they also cause the greatest burden of disease. The eight selected chronic diseases are associated with more than three-fifths (61%) of the total burden of disease in Australia, with cancer (19%) and cardiovascular disease (15%) accounting for the greatest burden.

Where can I find out more in *Australia's health 2016*?

Chapter 3 Leading causes of ill health

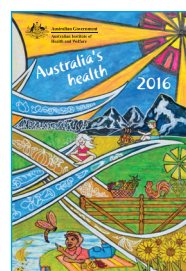
<www.aihw.gov.au/australias-health/2016/ill-health/>

Chapter 4 Determinants of health

<www.aihw.gov.au/australias-health/2016/determinants/>

Chapter 5 Health of population groups

<www.aihw.gov.au/australias-health/2016/population-groups/>



A copy of the full report is available on the AIHW website.

For more information

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