



## 3.0 Overview

Most Australians are affected by ill health at some point in their life. For some, the effects of the illness or injury will be short term; for others, they can be long lasting and have a severe impact on their quality of life. This chapter provides information on the leading causes of ill health in Australia, including cancer, cardiovascular disease mental health conditions and musculoskeletal conditions. It also features specific diseases and injuries that are important for subsets of the population: mesothelioma; eating disorders; family, domestic and sexual violence; opioid harm; and communicable diseases. This overview highlights some, but not all, causes of ill health presented in this chapter.

Burden of disease analysis is one way to measure the impact of different diseases or injuries on a population. It combines the burden of living with ill health and the burden of dying prematurely. For all ages combined, the leading cause of total disease burden in Australia in 2011 was coronary heart disease, followed by lung cancer for males and other musculoskeletal conditions for females. The leading causes differ across age groups, reflecting that people experience different health problems at different stages of their life. For example, for children aged 5–14, the top 3 causes of total disease burden were asthma, anxiety disorders and depressive disorders; for Australians aged 85–94, they were coronary heart disease, dementia and stroke.

Cause of death information is another way to identify leading causes of ill health in a population. In 2016, coronary heart disease was the leading cause of death in Australia for males, and dementia and Alzheimer disease for females. The leading causes of death also differ across age groups. In general, external causes such as land transport accidents, suicide and accidental poisoning are more prominent among people aged 15–44, while chronic conditions are more prominent among people aged 45 and over.

Most illness and deaths in Australia are caused by chronic conditions. Chronic conditions can place a high burden on individuals, their families and carers, and the health system. It is estimated that 1 in 2 (50%) Australians have at least one of 8 selected common chronic conditions: arthritis, asthma, back pain and problems, cancer, cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, and mental health conditions. Collectively, these conditions accounted for 61% of the total disease burden in 2011 and contributed to 87% of deaths in 2015.

Cancer is a diverse group of several hundred diseases; collectively, cancer is the greatest cause of disease burden in Australia, accounting for around one-fifth (19%) of the total disease burden. It is estimated that about 380 people will be diagnosed with cancer and 133 people will die from cancer every day this year—that is about 138,300 new cases and 48,600 deaths in 2018. The most commonly diagnosed cancers in 2018 will be prostate cancer for males and breast cancer for females. Mesothelioma has the lowest 5-year relative survival of all cancer types at 6.4%. The main cause of mesothelioma is exposure to asbestos, and Australia has one of the highest rates of mesothelioma incidence in the world.





Coronary heart disease is the leading specific cause of total burden of disease in Australia, accounting for 7.7% of the total disease burden. It affects about 1 in 30 adults (3.3%, 645,000 people), and 1 in 6 people aged 75 and over. Every day in Australia, about 170 people aged 25 and over experience an acute coronary event (a heart attack or unstable angina).

Diabetes is an area of health concern for Australia. Prevalence of the disease has tripled over the last 25 years, and 6.1% of the adult population (1.2 million people) self-report having diabetes. Death rates for people with diabetes are almost double those for the general Australian population.

Two common chronic conditions are musculoskeletal conditions and chronic respiratory conditions—each of which affects around 1 in 3 Australians. Nearly 6.9 million Australians have musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis, back pain and osteoporosis and about 7 million Australians are affected by chronic respiratory conditions such as hay fever and asthma.

Almost half (45%) of Australians 16–85 will experience a mental disorder such as depression, anxiety or substance use disorder at some stage in their life; an estimated 20% of adult population and 14% of children and young people experienced a mental health disorder in the past 12 months. Eating disorders are a group of mental illness which affect anywhere from 4–16% of the population. Eating disorders were the 10th leading cause of non-fatal disease burden for females aged 15–44 years in 2011, and are of particular concern for younger females.

Dementia is a growing challenge for Australia as the population ages and life expectancy increases. In 2018, 376,000 Australians will have dementia and 61% of people with dementia will be female. In 2016, dementia replaced heart disease as the leading underlying cause of death for females and remained the third leading cause of death for males.

Family, domestic and sexual violence causes more illness, disability and premature death for women aged 25–44 than any other risk factor. Exposure to intimate partner violence is linked to depressive and anxiety disorders, early pregnancy loss, homicide and violence, suicide and self-inflicted injuries, alcohol use disorders, and children born prematurely or with low birthweight. One in 6 (17%, or 1.6 million) Australian women have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner, since the age of 15. Serious cases can end in hospitalisation or death.

The use and misuse of opioid drugs can result in overdose and physical harm. Australian statistics show recent increases in opioid-related poisonings, overdoses and deaths—between 2007 and 2016, there was an 89% increase in drug-induced deaths involving opioids, and between 2011–12 and 2015–16, opioid-related hospitalisations increased by 12%.

