



Health Status of Latin America and the Caribbean

As the population ages, the importance of chronic diseases as the main cause of death and morbidity increases, a process known as the “epidemiological transition.”

According to the latest data from the World Health Organization (WHO), [75 percent of deaths in the region are attributable to chronic diseases](#), which represents an increase of almost 20 percent over 1990. It is estimated [that aging of the population was responsible for around 15 percent of the increase in the total burden of mortality and morbidity](#) attributable to chronic diseases between 2006 and 2016 ([Gakidou et al. 2017](#)).

The main cause of mortality and morbidity among the elderly in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is cardiovascular diseases, which represent 25 percent of the total disease burden among the population of 60 years and older, with prevalence that increases strongly with age.

One of the main causes of the high prevalence of cardiovascular diseases is high blood pressure. Although trends have been declining since 1975, levels are still relatively high, particularly among men, and reach 30 percent in the population over 18 years of age in some countries, according to [WHO \(2015\)](#) estimates.

[Diabetes is another chronic disease that has been increasing](#) in LAC in recent decades. This disease is

responsible for 7 percent of the total disease burden of the population age 60 and over in the region. Fifteen percent of people in this age range suffer from diabetes, with prevalence rates slightly higher in men than in women. The problem is especially serious in the Caribbean countries.

The high prevalence rates of diabetes and hypertension have led to an increase in the percentage of people suffering from [chronic kidney diseases](#). The problem is particularly pressing in LAC, where [more than 20 percent of the population over 60 years of age suffers from kidney diseases](#). This prevalence increases with age, reaching a level almost double among those who are 80 or older.

Also noteworthy is the impact of musculoskeletal diseases, because even when their mortality rate is relatively low such diseases have a great impact on the quality of life of people and are associated with high levels of dependence ([Woolf et al. 2012](#)).

Finally, the aging of the population has brought with it an increase in the number of people with neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and other dementias, especially among those over 80 years of age, with prevalence rates of around 17 percent.

In addition to age, the change in lifestyles (a more sedentary lifestyle, the adoption of bad eating habits, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption) also plays an important role in the increase of chronic diseases.

The impact of the disease in terms of disability and premature death in LAC almost doubled from 1990 to 2015. Furthermore, it is estimated that by 2020 this region will have the highest prevalence rates of dementias in the world ([The Lancet 2015](#)).

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The effect of being overweight and of obesity is remarkable, given their relationship with cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, hypertension, and the presence of high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood. It is estimated that 23 percent of the population in the region is obese and, except in Haiti, Paraguay, and Nicaragua, more than half are overweight, with Mexico and Chile leading the list (FAO/PAHO 2016). Behind this increase in obesity levels is the consumption of unhealthy and processed foods, as well as the lack of physical activity.

Although rates have been declining in recent years, tobacco use also continues to be a serious problem in the region, with prevalence rates reaching 22 percent

for men and 10 percent for women (WHO 2015). The consumption of tobacco or derived products is considered to be responsible for half of the “avoidable” deaths globally ([López, Collishaw and Piha 1994](#)), and has been positively associated with the development of chronic diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, and even the development of Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias ([OPS 2016](#); [Ferri et al. 2010](#)).

Finally, excessive alcohol consumption has reached worrying levels in LAC and has serious consequences for the health of older adults.

Alcohol consumption in the region is 40 percent higher than the global average ([Monteiro 2013](#)) and its impact on older adults is reflected in depression, anxiety, and less social support ([Kirchner et. al. 2007](#)).

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