

Improved diets and increased physical activity may lead to better health for the US

Data on potentially modifiable causes of health loss, or risk factors, such as improved nutrition and increased physical activity can help policymakers and donors prioritize prevention strategies to achieve better population health.

Dietary risks were the leading cause of disease burden in the US and contributed to more health loss in 2010 than smoking, high blood pressure, and high blood sugar (Figure 1).

Dietary risks include 14 different components. Diets low in fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds and high in sodium, processed meats, and trans fat cause the most premature death and disability (Figure 2).

How many deaths occur every year from dietary risks? 678,282, or 1 out of every 4 deaths. That's more than 8,500 school buses filled with elementary school children.

What does that mean for overall health loss in the country? Total health loss is a massive 11.5 million DALYs (disability-adjusted life years), or 14% of all health loss in the US.

What does that mean in terms of the number of years of life lost due to premature mortality? Dietary risk factors lead to 9.7 million years of life lost.

Figure 1: Percent of DALYs attributable to the 17 leading risk factors, both sexes, all ages, US, 2010

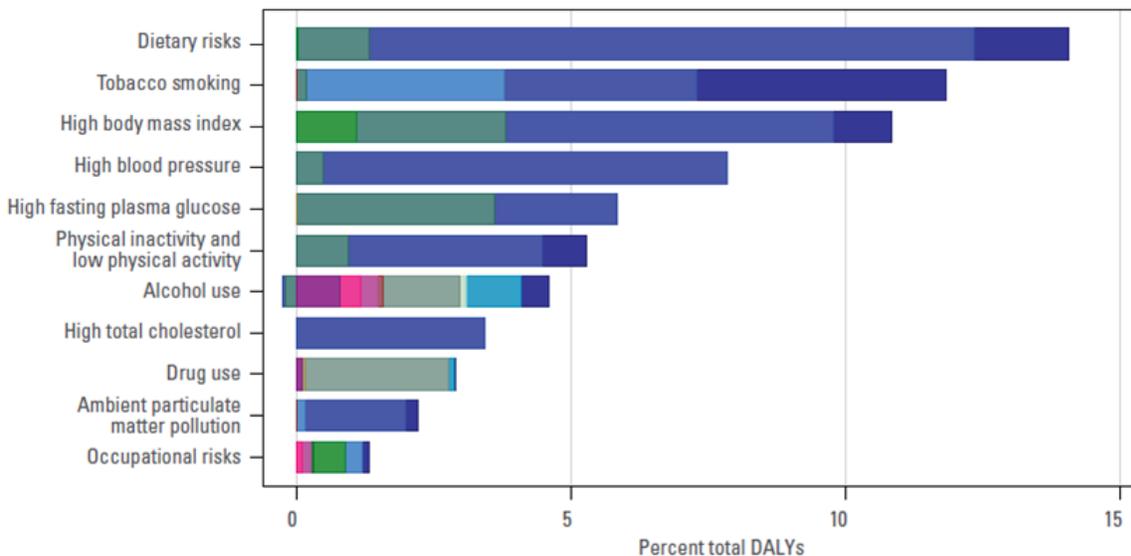
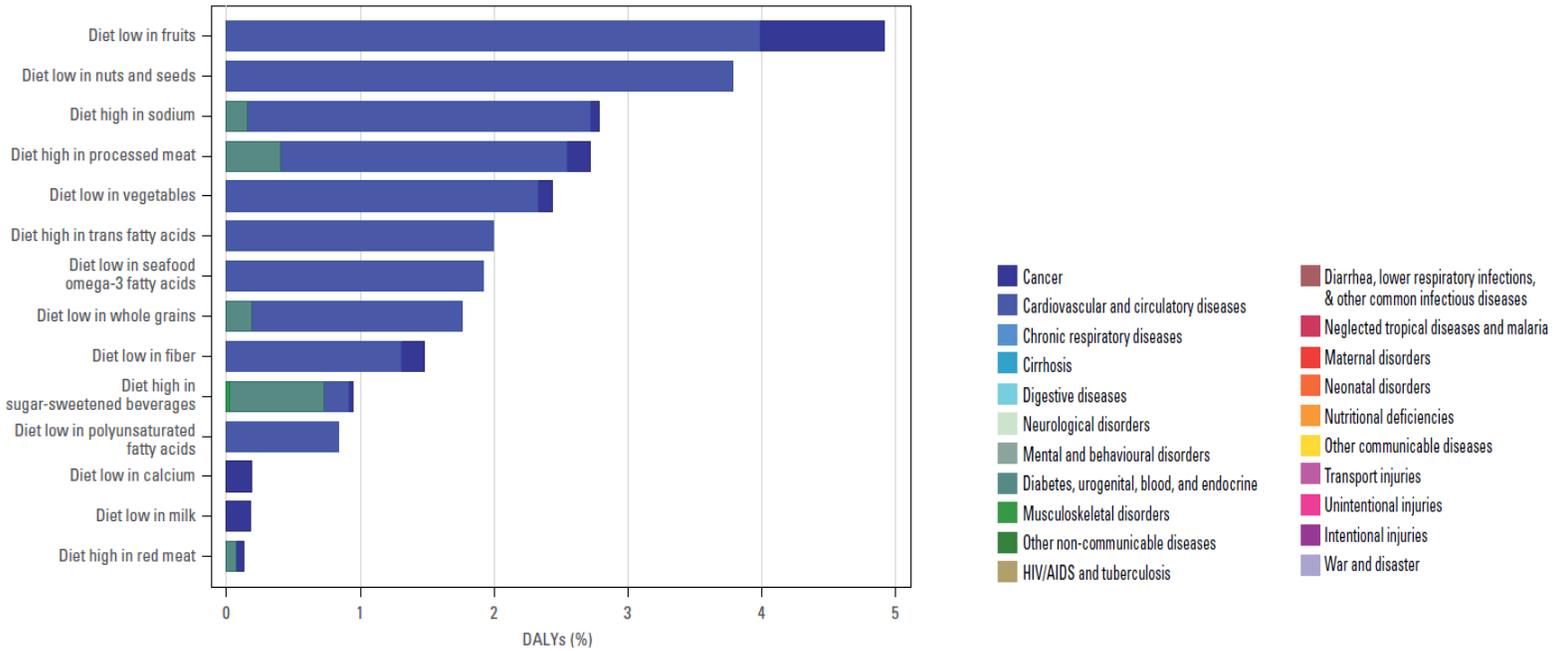


Figure 2: Percent of DALYs attributable to the 14 dietary risk factors, both sexes, all ages, US, 2010



Note: The size of each colored portion of the bars represents the number of DALYs attributable to a given risk factor. DALYs from each risk factor should not be added together.

Insufficient physical activity was the sixth leading cause of disease burden in the US in 2010. Premature death and disability attributable to physical inactivity caused more health loss than alcohol use, high cholesterol, and drug use. The US has seen an increase in physical activity over the past decade. In some counties, the increase was 15% or higher between 2001 and 2009.

How many deaths is that every year? 234,022. More than twice as many as all the deaths attributable to alcohol, or more than 10,000 standard-sized classrooms filled with students.

What does that mean in terms of the number of years of life lost due to premature mortality? When you add it up, a lack of physical activity leads to 3.5 million years of life lost.

And what about overall health loss in the country? Disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) capture the toll from premature death and years lived with disability. Lack of physical activity causes 4.3 million DALYs, which is higher than air pollution, high cholesterol, or drug use.

For more information on the findings from this report, visit www.ihmeuw.org.