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South-east Asia sees 148% jump in heart disease: study

New research, which also covers the incidence of mental disorders, smoking and road injuries, spotlights the growing burden on public health

An image from a heart scan at the National Heart Centre Singapore. In the region, the factors contributing to heart disease are high blood pressure, dietary risks, air pollution, high levels of "bad" cholesterol and smoking.
PHOTO: BT FILE

THE number of people with cardiovascular disease has surged by 148 per cent in South-east Asia over the past three decades, with the condition becoming the region's leading cause of death, new research has found.

In 2021, 37 million people in the region had cardiovascular disease, and 1.7 million died from it. The findings by researchers at Seattle-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) and the National University of Singapore are based on analysis of health data between 1990 and 2021 drawn from the 10 South-east Asian countries in the Asean bloc.

The results, published this week in a special edition of *The Lancet Public Health* dedicated to the region, throw the spotlight on the growing burden on public health, including cardiovascular disease, mental disorders, smoking and road injuries. The main reasons contributing to cardiovascular disease were high systolic blood pressure, dietary risks, air pollution, high low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and smoking.

The ageing population in the region is also contributing to the big jump in case numbers, said Marie Ng, the lead author and affiliate associate professor at IHME and associate professor at NUS.

"Without immediate action from each of the countries, these preventable health conditions will worsen, causing more death and disability across Asean," said Ng, who has sought proper resource allocation from governments.

It is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the incidence of deaths from cardiovascular disease rose more than predicted, and that a separate study from 2023 flagged the risk of cardiovascular disease in children born to mothers infected with Covid during pregnancy.

The new study in *The Lancet Public Health* also found that more than 80 million people in Asean have major mental disorders – a figure 70 per cent higher than in 1990. Going y age brackets, 15- to 19-year-olds registered the steepest climb in numbers, at nearly 11 per cent.

Here are excerpts of other key findings:

■ Smoking remains a major public health concern. Since 1990, the number of smokers in every Asean country has gone up, and the total number jumped by 63 per cent to 137 million. Smoking prevalence, however, has fallen. Tobacco smoking accounted for about 11 per cent of all-cause mortality across the region; the death rate varied from under 70 per 100,000 males in developed Singapore to more than five times higher in Cambodia.

■ Injuries killed hundreds of thousands of people in 2021 across South-east Asia; road accidents were the leading cause in most countries, followed by falls, self-harm, drowning and interpersonal violence. Road injuries were particularly severe in Thailand, where 30 deaths per 100,000 people were reported in 2021. The global average death rate is 15 per 100,000. BLOOMBERG

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