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Heart disease surge in South-east Asia makes it leading killer: Study

The number of people with cardiovascular disease surged by 148 per cent in South-east Asia over the past three decades, with the condition becoming the region's leading cause of mortality and morbidity, according to new research.

A total of 37 million people in the region suffered from cardiovascular disease in 2021 and 1.7 million died from it.

The findings by researchers at the Seattle-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IMHE) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) are based on analysis of health data between 1990 and 2021 from 10 South-east Asian countries that make up the Asean grouping.

The results, published this week in a special edition of The Lancet Public Health dedicated to the region, highlight the growing burden of 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 tobacco use.

The aging population in the region also contributes to the big jump in cases, according to Dr Marie Ng, the lead author and affiliate associate professor at IMHE 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 Dr Ng, who sought proper resource allocation from governments.

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

The latest study published in The Lancet Public Health found that more than 80 million people in Asean suffered from major mental disorders, 70 per cent higher than in 1990.

A closer look by age showed 15 to 19-year-olds had the steepest climb in prevalence at nearly 11 per cent.

37 million

Number of people in South-east Asia who suffered from cardiovascular disease in 2021.

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 increased, and the total number jumped by 63 per cent to 137 million, although smoking prevalence has declined. Tobacco smoking accounted for about 11 per cent of all-cause mortality across the region, with the death rate varied from less than 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, with road accidents being 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.

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