

life expectancy occur among males at the national level. For both Tennessee and the nation, these observed differences may be real or be an artifact of relatively more age misreporting among elderly black males.

Leading Causes of Death

- In 1997, the five leading causes of death in Tennessee in rank order were heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and unintentional injury (“accidents and adverse effects”). This duplicated the rank order for the national population. Rounding out the top 10 causes of death in Tennessee were pneumonia and influenza, diabetes mellitus, suicide, chronic liver disease, and homicide. The death rate for heart disease (308.1 deaths per 100,000 population) exceeded the combined rates for cancer (221.2) and stroke (76.6). If the three injury categories (“accidents,” suicide and homicide) were combined, then injury would rank as the fourth leading cause of death (70 per 100,000 population) in Tennessee, just behind stroke, and well ahead of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (46.1 deaths per 100,000 population).
- In rank order, heart disease, cancer and stroke constituted the leading causes of death in Tennessee in 1997 for whites and blacks of both genders. Diabetes was the seventh leading cause of death overall (24.5 deaths per 100,000 population), but ranked as the fourth leading killer among black females (46.1). The diabetes death rate for black females was almost twice as high as that of black males (26.5). When their respective rates were age-adjusted, however, this differential shrank to 17% (31.2 deaths per 100,000 for black females versus 26.6 for black males).
- In 1997, unintentional injury (“accidents” and adverse effects) was the leading cause of death among Tennesseans ages one to 39 years. Homicide, which together with suicide comprises intentional injury, ranked as the premier killer of black males ages 15-29 years. It was their second leading cause of death at ages 30-34 behind unintentional injury, but was also the leading killer of black males at ages 35-39.
- Cancer (malignant neoplasms) ranked as the number one cause of death among Tennesseans ages 40-74 years and second to heart disease from age 75 to 84 years. Stroke was second to heart disease at ages 85 years and older.
- Heart disease was the leading killer of white males at ages 40-59, 65-69, and 75 years and older. But cancer occupied the top rank at ages 60-64 and 70-74. Cancer was the leading cause of death among white females ages 40-74, black males ages 65-74, and black females ages 30-39 and 45-64.
- Changes in life expectancy at birth between 1990 and 1997 were minimal for white females, and blacks of both genders. In contrast, white males experienced a gain of nearly a year, from 71.3 years in 1990 to 72.2 years in 1997. Almost half of that gain could be attributed to a decline in the heart disease death rate, and another 16% to a decline in the cancer death rate. The largest improvements in mortality occurred among white males in the age range 55 to 79 years.