

H1-3 Actual Causes of Death in the United States

Actual causes of death are defined as lifestyle and behavioral factors such as smoking and physical inactivity that contribute to the leading killers of Americans, including heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

	Number of deaths per year	Percent of total deaths per year
Tobacco	435,000	18.1%
Poor diet/physical inactivity	400,000	16.6
Alcohol consumption	85,000	3.5
Microbial agents	75,000	3.1
Toxic agents	55,000	2.3
Motor vehicles	43,000	1.8
Firearms	29,000	1.2
Sexual behavior	20,000	0.8
Illicit drug use	17,000	0.7

Microbial agents includes bacterial and viral infections like influenza and pneumonia. Toxic agents includes environmental pollutants and chemical agents such as asbestos.

Compared to data from 1990, tobacco remains the leading behavioral cause of death. However, a significant increase has occurred in the number of deaths attributed to poor diet and physical activity (and their relationship to obesity), indicating that these factors may soon surpass tobacco as a cause of death among Americans

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004.