

POPULATION NEWS

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What do Portuguese people die of?

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Introduction

Nowadays, in developed countries as Portugal, deaths are essentially concentrated at old and very old ages, but it is still rather important to identify main causes of death (CODs). Thus, following [Population News, Trends and Attitudes #1](#), where it was evaluated how mortality patterns have changed in Portugal, i.e., how mortality rates declined over time, it is also imperative to understand from what Portuguese inhabitants are dying of.

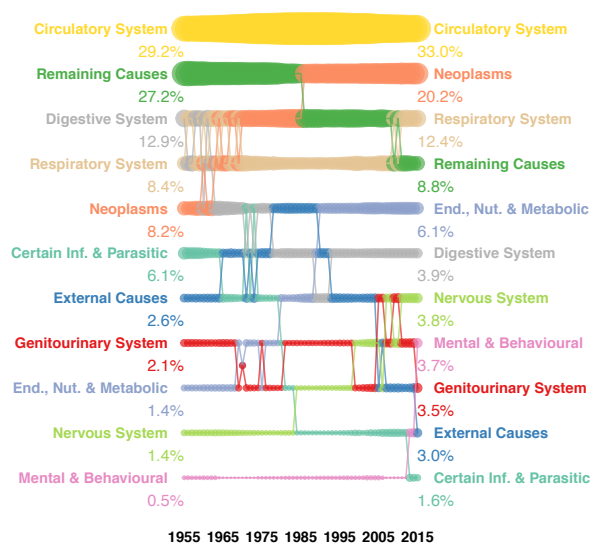
The share of deaths by cause and sex: 1955 - 2015

Reconstructing long-term CODs series across diverging International Classification of Diseases (ICD) versions (8th to 10th) based on data from World Health Organization (WHO) and Statistics Portugal (INE), allowed to evaluate the share of deaths by cause and sex from 1955 to 2015 for Portugal. Due to the exhaustive and detailed available list of CODs we focused on 11 major groups.

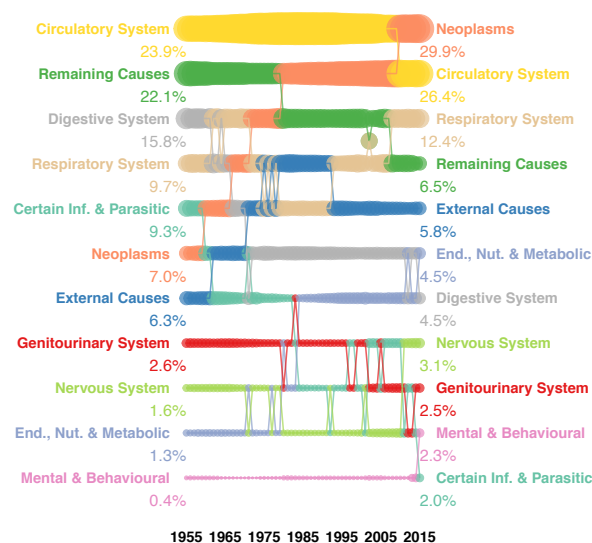
Presented figures not only contribute to identify what causes of death are most common but also, making use of weighted variable-size circles accordingly to correspondent COD share of deaths, to detect possible changes in their volume of deaths over time.

Changes in the share of deaths by cause and sex in Portugal, 1955 – 2015

Female



Male



As expected, it is possible to identify that, nowadays, most deaths occur due to diseases of the circulatory system and neoplasms. Nevertheless, significant differences between sexes and across the observed time

series can be acknowledged. Despite most share of deaths among females being related to circulatory system diseases between 1955 and 2015, in the male case, since 2010 that neoplasms are on the leading. In fact, neoplasms present an increasing pattern by opposition with circulatory system diseases share, that reached its peak on the 1980s/90s (highest: 1983, males – 40 % of all deaths; 1991, females – 50 % of all deaths)

Together with circulatory system diseases and neoplasms, respiratory system diseases complete the top-3 main causes of death in Portugal in 2015 with a share of 12.4% among all deaths for both sexes (3rd place since 2008/09).

Despite that same top-3 CODs can be simultaneously identified for males and females, with important differences concerning its share, deaths caused by external causes follow a very distinctive evolution in both situations. At the time series beginning, i.e., 1955, external CODs were the 7th most representative (males: 6.3%; females: 2.6%). External causes share of deaths increased for both sexes until 1978/79, attaining the 4th (males) and 5th (females) places on the COD hierarchy. Since the end of 1980s, beginning of 1990s, that both sexes decreased the number of deaths resulting from external factors. While females present very encouraging results with only 3.0% of deaths attributed to external causes in 2015 (10th place), for males the decline was fairly insignificant over the last 25 years of data: 5.8% (5th place).

Certain infectious and parasitic diseases, once on the leading and in 1955 occupying the 5th/6th place on the hierarchy, are now the least representative. Last but not least, the share of deaths evolution related to mental and behavioural disorders should be underlined: despite representing just 3.7% of all female and 2.3% of all male deaths in 2015, WHO states that *“the burden of mental disorders continues to growth with significant impacts on health and major social, human rights and economic consequences in all countries of the world”* ([WHO Mental Disorders Fact Sheet, 2017](#)).

Final Remarks

Circulatory system diseases and neoplasms are, as similarly observed globally, the leading causes of death in Portugal. As deaths attributed to external causes, those two leading causes are highly related to behavioural risks and that can be prevented. Tobacco consumption is an important risk factor for both diseases, together with other behavioural and dietary risks: unhealthy diet, obesity, physical inactivity, low fruit and vegetable intake, and alcohol consumption (WHO [Cancer](#) and [Cardiovascular Diseases](#) Fact Sheet, 2017/18). Despite the expected increasing neoplasms-attributed number of deaths in the future, overall neoplasm survivorship is increasing in Europe and Portugal is seems to perform well among its neighbours ([Allemani et al., 2018](#)).

Nevertheless, the nervous system and endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases are two causes of death that also need some extra attention, despite presenting relative low share of deaths it is increasing over time by opposition with digestive and genitourinary system diseases.

This general and broad perspective is still the tip of the iceberg and future Pop-News number will address different CODs separately pursuing additional insights on this issue.

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