

# Leading causes of death

2001-2021 data



## BACKGROUND

This report provides final 2021 death counts for the "Leading causes of death" tables in a [report we published in May 2022](#). (Tables begin on page 15 of that report.)

In addition to final counts, we provide more context to help the reader understand the data, both by comparing our numbers to statewide figures and looking at trends over time.

## COWLITZ COUNTY DATA SUMMARY

Our analysis found

**FOUR CAUSES OF DEATH** to be of **HIGHEST CONCERN** in **COWLITZ COUNTY**, according to their overall rank, trends over time, comparison with Washington State, and their contribution to premature death.



### CANCER

# #1

LEADING CAUSE of death

# #1

driver of **PREMATURE DEATH**



### HEART DISEASE

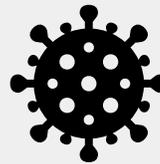
# #2

LEADING CAUSE of death

Tied with unintentional injury for

# #2

driver of **PREMATURE DEATH**



### COVID-19

# #3

LEADING CAUSE of death

# #4

driver of **PREMATURE DEATH**



### UNINTENTIONAL INJURIES

Tied with heart disease for

# #2

driver of **PREMATURE DEATH**

Cowlitz figures have remained steady, but **STATEWIDE PER CAPITA** figures have **INCREASED**



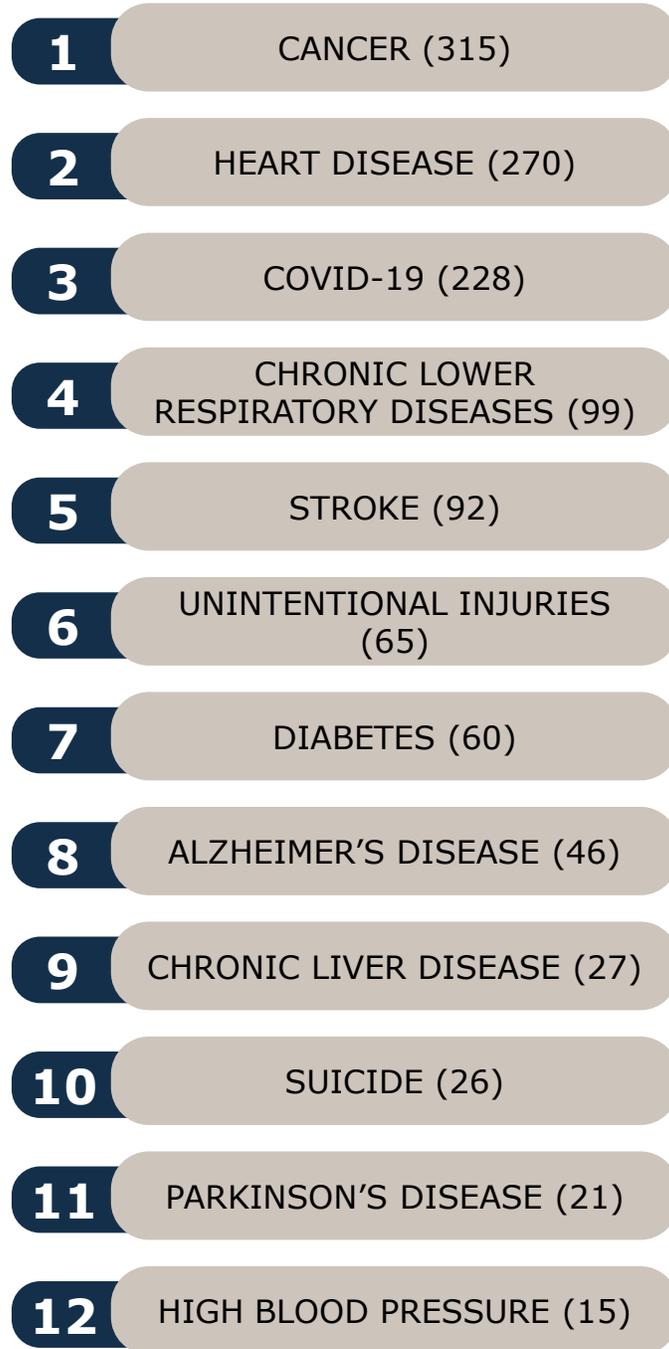
**SINCE 2019**

# Leading causes of death in 2021



## TOTAL POPULATION

(1,588 total deaths)

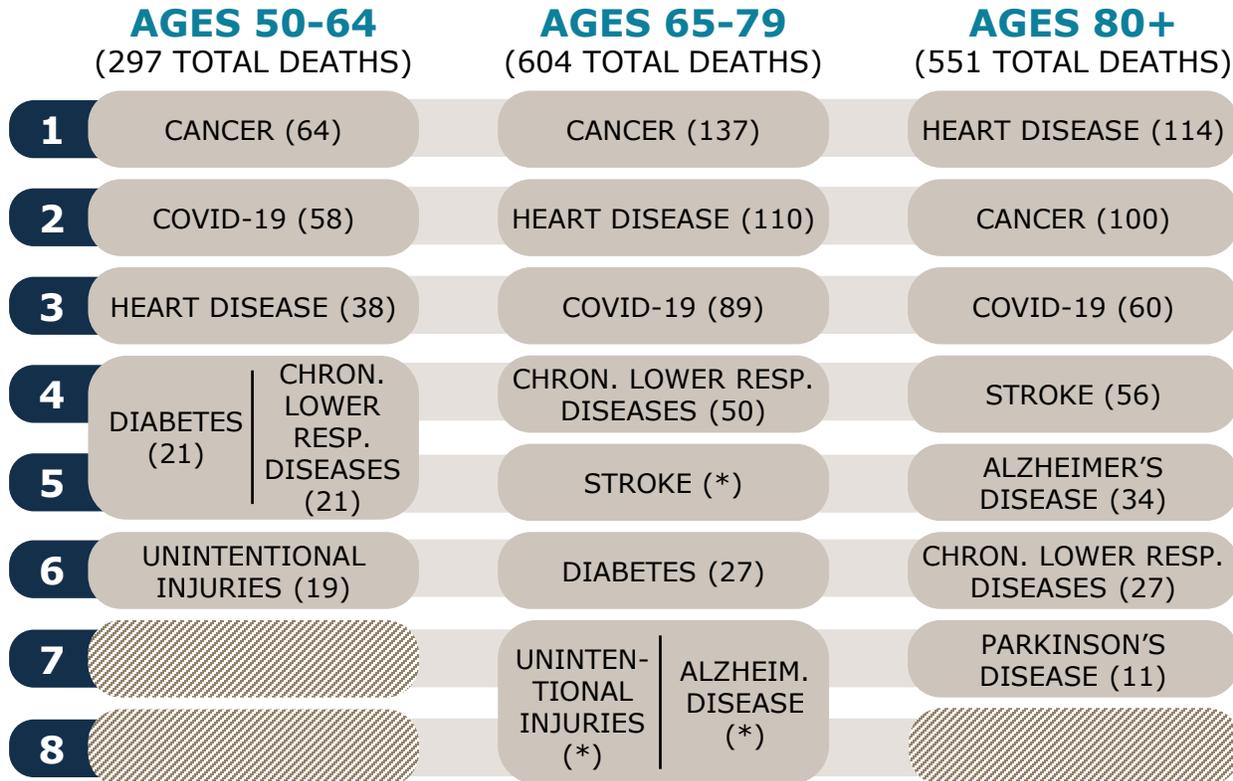
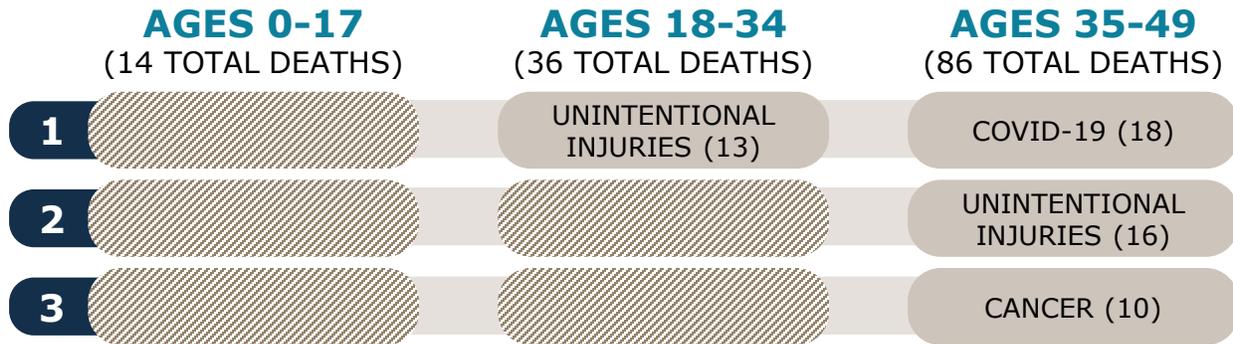


# Leading causes of death in 2021

by age group



**SOME OF THE FOLLOWING** tables contain shaded boxes to indicate counts of fewer than 10. To protect confidentiality, and to ensure we are reporting statistically stable figures, we typically do not analyze or report counts of fewer than 10. We also suppress counts which can be used to back-calculate those cells; these are marked with an asterisk (\*).



# Frequently-asked questions



## HOW HAVE TOTAL DEATHS CHANGED OVER TIME?

Our total death counts increased about 80-90% over the past 20 years, but the risk of dying **didn't change** from **2001-2019** and **increased about 20%** from **2019-2021**.

The total yearly death count among Cowlitz County residents has increased by about 80-90% in the past 20 years, from around 870 to around 1,600 deaths per year.

At the same time, our population has gotten larger and older. We are typically most interested in the risk of death. This tells us how many deaths we are seeing after factoring in these underlying population changes. Calculating risk allows us to draw conclusions about changes over time and compare groups of people to each other, such as comparing our county to the state average.

After taking this into account, the risk of dying in Cowlitz County did not change from 2001 through 2019 and then increased about 20% from 2019 to 2021. Statewide, the risk of death decreased by 10-15% from 2001-2010, held steady until 2019, and then increased by about 10% from 2019-2021.

## WHAT ABOUT DRUG/ALCOHOL OVERDOSE DEATHS?

There has been considerable community interest in deaths from drug/alcohol overdose.

Traditional leading cause of death analysis uses pre-defined categories. Drug/alcohol overdose deaths are considered an injury death; those are classified by intent: suicide, homicide, or unintentional.

So, drug/alcohol overdose deaths are included in the suicide, homicide, and unintentional injury categories in this report, depending on their intent.

[This report that we recently published](#) provides drug/alcohol overdose death data for Cowlitz County through 2021.

**Drug/alcohol overdose** deaths are included in the **suicide, homicide, and unintentional injury** categories.

# Frequently-asked questions



## WHERE DO THESE DATA COME FROM?

**Death certificates** are reported to Washington State's Vital Registration system. The **cause of death** is determined by the **attending physician**.

Death data were accessed in June 2022 from the Washington State Community Health Assessment Tool (CHAT). These data come from death certificates reported to Washington State's Vital Registration system. The cause of death is determined by the attending physician. The Washington State Department of Health provides more information about death reporting on their [How To Report Cause Of Death webpage](#).

Cowlitz figures include deaths among residents who live in Cowlitz County, regardless of the county or state in which the death took place.

Final population figures are not currently available for 2021. This report uses interim population estimates developed by Seattle-King County: Washington State Population Interim Estimates (PIE), March 2022.

## HOW DID YOU IDENTIFY THE CAUSES OF DEATH OF HIGHEST CONCERN?

The top 4 causes of death of highest concern were identified by considering several characteristics about each cause of death:

- The cause of death's overall ranking in 2021.
- How Cowlitz County compares to the Washington State average, after factoring in population size and age composition.
- Time trends in Cowlitz County and in Washington State, after factoring in population growth and aging.
- How much each cause of death contributes to premature death. Premature death is defined as the death of anyone younger than age 78, which is Cowlitz county's current life expectancy.

# Frequently-asked questions



## HOW DOES POPULATION AGING AFFECT THESE FIGURES?

Because the population is getting older over time, we expect counts to increase more rapidly for causes of death that are concentrated in older age groups. This could result in them “moving up” in the rankings.

The risk of dying from most causes of death increases with age, but this relationship varies by specific cause of death. To illustrate, we can compare the risk of various causes of death among individuals aged 85+ (elderly) to those aged 15-24 (teens & young adults).

Alzheimer’s disease deaths occur almost exclusively in older adults, and the risk of death from chronic lower respiratory disease among the elderly is 2,000 times the risk among teens & young adults.

Contrast these with unintentional injury deaths, whose risk among the elderly is 17 times that among teens & young adults, and suicide, whose risk among the elderly is 2 times the risk among teens & young adults.

Chronic liver disease death risk follows an even different pattern – peaking around age 60.



# Small numbers considerations



**Have questions? Email:** [AskCowlitzHealth@cowlitzwa.gov](mailto:AskCowlitzHealth@cowlitzwa.gov)

We suppress figures based on counts of 10, in order to protect confidentiality and ensure we are reporting statistically stable figures.

Even when counts are higher than 10, we often cannot draw strong conclusions.

For example, in 2017, 10 Cowlitz county residents died from Parkinson's disease. In 2018, that figure was 12. We may be tempted to conclude that Parkinson's disease deaths increased by 20% ( $12 - 10 = 2$ ;  $2 \div 10 = 20\%$ ) and become concerned that we should investigate what is causing the increase. However, because the increase was based on an increase of just 2 deaths, we cannot make a strong conclusions from the data. This same principle applies to comparing Cowlitz figures with the statewide average.

To account for this lack of precision, all percents in this report have been rounded, most to the nearest decile. If the percent is around halfway between two deciles, a range of deciles is given.