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The global burden of respiratory illnesses: Epidemiology, risk factors, and health policy implications.

Isabella Obeng*

Department of Respiratory Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

***Correspondence to:** Isabella Obeng, Department of Respiratory Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. E-mail: i.obeng@uniroma1.it

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Introduction

Respiratory illnesses are a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, accounting for a significant proportion of the global disease burden. These conditions range from acute infections like pneumonia and influenza to chronic diseases such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and lung cancer. Their impact is especially profound in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where access to healthcare and preventive services is often limited. Understanding the epidemiology, risk factors, and health policy implications of respiratory illnesses is crucial for designing effective interventions and improving global respiratory health [1].

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), lower respiratory tract infections rank among the top causes of death globally, particularly among children under five and elderly adults. Pneumonia alone is responsible for nearly 800,000 deaths annually in children under five, most of which are preventable with timely vaccination and treatment. Meanwhile, chronic respiratory diseases, including COPD and asthma, affect hundreds of millions of people and contribute to substantial healthcare costs and loss of productivity [2].

COPD is the third leading cause of death globally, with approximately 3.2 million deaths in 2019. The disease is most prevalent in smokers and individuals exposed to environmental and occupational pollutants. Asthma, while less fatal, remains a major public health concern, affecting over 260 million people worldwide. Its impact on quality of life, school attendance, and workplace productivity makes it a significant economic burden, particularly in underserved communities [3].

Lung cancer, often linked to tobacco exposure, is another critical contributor to respiratory disease burden. It is the leading cause of cancer death globally, responsible for approximately 1.8 million deaths each year. The high mortality rate is largely due to late diagnosis and limited access to early detection and treatment options, especially in resource-poor settings [4].

Multiple risk factors contribute to the high prevalence of respiratory illnesses. Tobacco smoking is the most significant, responsible for over 70% of COPD and a large proportion of lung cancer cases. Air pollution, both outdoor and indoor, plays a major role, particularly in densely populated urban areas and households that rely on biomass fuels for cooking and heating. Occupational exposures to dust, chemicals, and fumes are also major contributors in both industrial and agricultural settings [5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, respiratory illnesses represent a major global health challenge with profound medical, economic, and social implications. Addressing this burden requires a multifaceted approach involving prevention, early diagnosis, effective treatment, and strong health policy frameworks. By prioritizing respiratory health at the national and international levels, we can reduce avoidable deaths, improve quality of life, and promote sustainable healthcare systems for future generations.

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