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A Partnership of MaineHealth and the Maine Physician Hospital Organization

High Blood Pressure Named One of Top Causes of “Preventable” Deaths in U.S.

In a study published in the April 2009 issue of PLoS Medicine, Dr. Goodarz Danaei and colleagues reviewed 2005 disease-specific mortality data from the National Center for Health Statistics, then compared it to previously published studies to determine how much 12 modifiable lifestyle, diet and metabolic risk factors increased the risk of death from preventive chronic diseases.

The group determined that **smoking accounted for one in five deaths and was most problematic in men, and that high blood pressure accounted for nearly one in six deaths and was particularly common in women.**

While smoking and high blood pressure were shown to be the two most deadly risk factors, others were also significant, including **overweight and obesity, physical inactivity, and high blood glucose, which were responsible for approximately one in 10 deaths.** Most surprisingly, **high LDL cholesterol was not a major cause of death when looking at the data from a population level,** “ ‘we think of cholesterol as being sort of on par with BP, but at a population level, looking at this from a public health perspective, LDL cholesterol in the US is not one of the major factors for mortality,’ ” said Dr. Danaei.

Although reiterating what many clinicians already know, it is important to highlight that the research group “ ‘started out [looking at] not necessarily CV disease risk factors, but chronic disease risk factors...And what [they] found in this study was that...In the US and many other Western countries, heart disease is not only the number-one cause of death, it is the number-one preventable cause of death’ ” said Dr. Danaei.

The findings are important because they can help influence not only public health policy, but also clinical practice priorities. Specifically, Dr. Danaei notes that in comparing results from smoking cessation to blood pressure control, “the latter is much more effective, and with drugs being off patent and relatively cheaply available across the world, **blood pressure seems to be a more manageable story.**” That’s not to say that primary care clinicians should give up on helping patients quit smoking, but in the spirit of motivational interviewing and behavior change, it may be helpful to focus on managing high blood pressure successfully, instilling confidence in the patient, before moving on to the potentially more challenging problem of smoking.

If this article prompts you to think about re-focusing on blood pressure in your practice, then [click here](#) to learn more about the MaineHealth Cardiovascular Health Program’s free Blood Pressure Review and Update RIM available NOW!