

17 May 2021, Geneva – Long working hours led to 745 000 deaths from stroke and ischemic heart disease in 2016, a 29% increase since 2000, according to the latest estimates by the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization published in [Environment International](#)

In a first global analysis of the loss of life and health associated with working long hours, WHO and ILO estimate that, in 2016, 398 000 people died from stroke and 347 000 from heart disease as a result of having worked at least 55 hours a week. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of deaths from heart disease due to working long hours increased by 42%, and from stroke by 19%.

This work-related disease burden is particularly significant in men (72% of deaths occurred among males), people living in the Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions, and middle-aged or older workers. Most of the deaths recorded were among people dying aged 60-79 years, who had worked for 55 hours or more per week between the ages of 45 and 74 years.

With working long hours now known to be responsible for about one-third of the total estimated work-related burden of disease, it is established as the risk factor with the largest occupational disease burden. This shifts thinking towards a relatively new and more psychosocial occupational risk factor to human health.

The study concludes that working 55 or more hours per week is associated with an estimated 35% higher risk of a stroke and a 17% higher risk of dying from ischemic heart disease, compared to working 35-40 hours a week.

Further, the number of people working long hours is increasing, and currently stands at 9% of the total population globally. This trend puts even more people at risk of work-related disability and early death.

The new analysis comes as the COVID-19 pandemic shines a spotlight on managing working

hours; the pandemic is accelerating developments that could feed the trend towards increased working time.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way many people work,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “Teleworking has become the norm in many industries, often blurring the boundaries between home and work. In addition, many businesses have been forced to scale back or shut down operations to save money, and people who are still on the payroll end up working longer hours. No job is worth the risk of stroke or heart disease. Governments, employers and workers need to work together to agree on limits to protect the health of workers.”

“Working 55 hours or more per week is a serious health hazard,” added Dr Maria Neira, Director, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health, at the World Health Organization. “It’s time that we all, governments, employers, and employees wake up to the fact that long working hours can lead to premature death”.

Governments, employers and workers can take the following actions to protect workers’ health:

- governments can introduce, implement and enforce laws, regulations and policies that ban mandatory overtime and ensure maximum limits on working time;
- bipartite or collective bargaining agreements between employers and workers’ associations can arrange working time to be more flexible, while at the same time agreeing on a maximum number of working hours;
- employees could share working hours to ensure that numbers of hours worked do not climb above 55 or more per week.

Note for editors:

Two systematic reviews and meta-analyses of the latest evidence were conducted for this study. Data from 37 studies on ischemic heart disease covering more than 768 000 participants

and 22 studies on stroke covering more than 839 000 participants were synthesized. The study covered global, regional and national levels, and was based on data from more than 2300 surveys collected in 154 countries from 1970-2018.

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