

Heart disease, cancer, stroke are top killers in China, study finds

Men a bit more at risk than women

By Margie Mason
Associated Press

Heart disease, cancer and stroke are now the top killers of middle-aged people in China, fueled by high blood pressure and smoking, which have developed alongside the communist country's economy, according to one of the largest surveys of its kind.

The research into the major causes of death in adults found that over the past 45 years, China has undergone a huge health transition. Infectious disease has been replaced by the same chronic killers that plague the West.

The findings from the study of nearly 170,000 Chinese men and women over age 40 showed that about two-thirds of the 20,033 people who died during that time were killed by heart disease, cancer or stroke. The conclusions were based on medical data collected in 1991 with followup evaluations in 1999 and 2000.

Of those deaths involving people in their 40s to mid-60s — prime working years — Chinese mortality rates from each of the three categories topped deaths among the same age group in the United States, the study found.

The results, published in today's *New England Journal of Medicine*, back up what Robert Beaglehole, the World Health Organization's director of

chronic diseases, has known for a long time.

"I think it's probably exactly what it was like in the United States a couple decades ago," he said of China's health situation.

"... When it was apparent that young people in the prime of their lives were dropping down dead from heart attacks (in the U.S.), it drew attention to the problem which had sort of a human impact as well as an economic impact."

Beaglehole said the health transition occurred gradually as China became more prosperous: More people migrated from farms into cities, physical activity decreased, eating habits changed and smoking increased.

The findings also revealed more deaths occurred from the top three chronic diseases in China's rural areas than in cities, indicating the problem is widespread. Beaglehole urged China to learn from the struggles of wealthier countries and to develop a strategy to combat chronic diseases, while still addressing high-profile infectious diseases like AIDS and bird flu.

The study found that Chinese men are slightly more at risk than women, with 68.7 percent of male participants dying from the top three killers compared to 62.6 percent of females.

High blood pressure was the top preventable contributing factor to the deaths, followed by cigarette smoking, physical inactivity and being underweight.

Lung cancer was the top cause of death in that disease category, and 63 percent of the men surveyed were smokers.