



## NEWS RELEASE

### ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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## Heart disease and stroke death rates decline while cancer rates increase slightly

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Heart disease, cancer and cerebrovascular disease (stroke) are the three leading causes of death in both the United States and Alabama, according to the Center for Health Statistics of the Alabama Department of Public Health. Over the past 25 years, death rates from heart disease and stroke have been declining after taking into account the age of the population, but the death rate from cancer has increased slightly in Alabama.

These three causes of death are prominent in people who have lived long lives; however, they can also cause deaths to younger people. According to Kathryn Chapman, deputy director of the Statistical Analysis Division, "While heart disease is the leading cause of death overall in Alabama, for men and women in the age group 45-54, cancer has been the number one killer since 1982. In addition, since 1995, cancer has overtaken heart disease as the leading cause of death for those aged 55 to 74."

The risk of death from heart disease, cancer and stroke is greater for Alabamians of black or other races, particularly for men. The greatest difference has been for stroke with the death rate for blacks 30 to 50 percent higher than for whites for the past 25 years. Blacks also have a higher risk of death from stroke at younger ages. For cancer, the black rate has exceeded the white rate by 15 to 30 percent since 1979 and the black heart disease death rate has been approximately 15 percent higher than the white rate since 1985.

Men and women die from heart disease, cancer and stroke at different rates. Regardless of race, if you hold age constant, men have higher heart disease and cancer death rates than women. According to Dr. Chapman, a remarkable cancer death trend was noted for men.

"Beginning at age 65, the risk of death from cancer rises much more steeply for both black and white men than it does for women. This trend was not found for heart disease and stroke. This increasing death risk from cancer as men age, along with the fact that cancer has overtaken heart disease as the leading cause of death for the group 55 to 74, emphasizes the need for increased cancer screenings and education"

Differences between men and women were also noted for stroke death rates by race. For white Alabamians, men and women died from stroke at the same rate when adjusted for age. However, black and other race males died from stroke at a rate 23.8 percent higher than black and other race females. Black and other race males also died from stroke at a rate 50.6 percent higher than white males.

"We need to educate Alabamians about the risk factors and warning signs for major cardiovascular disease and cancer," said Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer. "We can

reduce disease risk by eating healthful foods, especially those low in saturated fat and cholesterol; engaging in daily physical activity; controlling high blood pressure; limiting alcohol intake and avoiding use of tobacco products."

More information is available from three recent reports on heart disease, cancer and stroke produced by the Center for Health Statistics. Copies are available on the Alabama Department of Public Health's Web site [www.adph.org](http://www.adph.org) or by contacting Kathryn Chapman or Florine Croxton at (334) 206-5429.

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