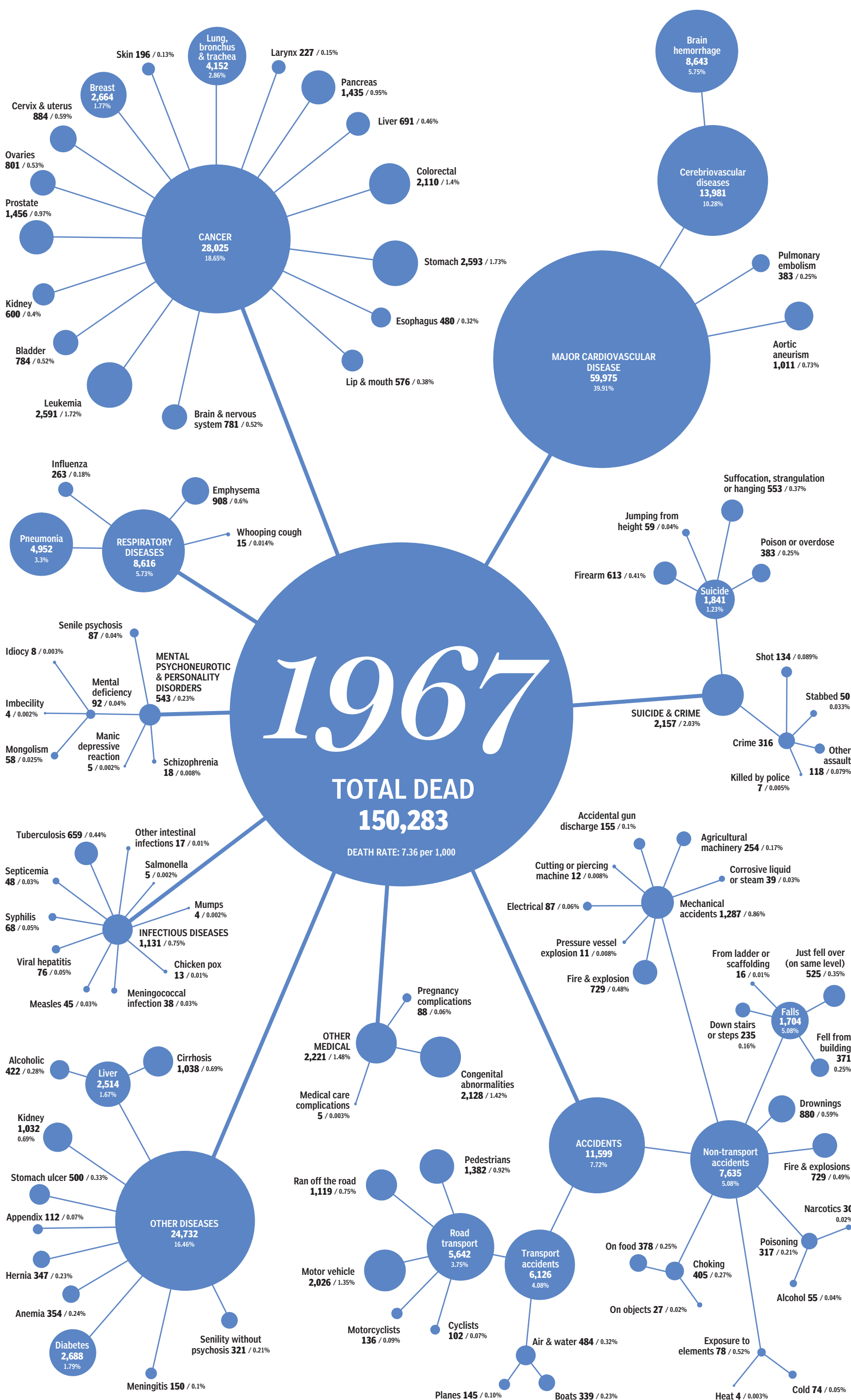


# 1967: HOW WE DIED

Death is life's one and only inevitable event, and it comes in many ways — officially, there are 999 causes. The mortality statistics below, from 1967 and 2007 (the most recent year available), are culled from the nation's death certificates. From bear attacks to heart attacks, the causes reveal specific details about how we die, and yet, because the ascribed causes can say more about the subjective judgments of the dispensing physician or the time in which they live, the statistics add up to a snapshot of death — and life — in two different times. Considering the way we die tells us much about the way we live.



A baby born in Canada today is about four times more likely to survive to their first birthday than during the 1960s. In 1967, 22 babies born out of 1,000 died during the first year of life. By 2007, that number had fallen to 5.1 out of 1,000. Total number of infant deaths: 8,151 in 1967, and just 1,881 in 2007.

“Heart attack” is a layperson’s term, typically referring to an acute myocardial infarction. Comparing heart attack deaths between 1967 and 2007 is difficult because “acute myocardial infarction” and “cardiac arrest” were not yet official causes of death during the 1960s — even if they were more common then. Doctors instead pointed to chronic underlying problems, such as hypertension and arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).

Cancer research funding statistics show that in 2007, \$10,701 went toward breast cancer research for every death from it that year, versus \$4,735 for prostate cancer, \$1,775 per colorectal cancer death and \$744 for each lung cancer death. Gall bladder cancer killed 278 Canadians in 2007 and apparently received no research funding whatsoever that year.

The data show many more lung cancer deaths in 2007 than in 1967, even though smoking rates are much lower now. Why? In part because the mistakes of the past are catching up with us, says Andrea Bezjack, head of the lung cancer team at Toronto’s Princess Margaret Hospital. Yesterday’s smokers are today’s lung cancer sufferers. As well, Dr. Bezjack says many lung cancers in 1967 may have gone without a firm diagnosis because biopsies were harder to perform then.

Present-day Statistics Canada data afford a more detailed breakdown of fatal falls than the 1967 edition — quantifying, for example, demises involving snow and ice (23), collisions between two people (3), wheelchairs (48), falls out of trees (4) and off cliffs (11), and, with particular poignancy, one fall from playground equipment.

Canadians are far less likely to die in car accidents today than during the 1960s, thanks in part to drunk driving and seat belt laws, and safer cars equipped with air bags. Also, University of Alberta nursing professor Donna Wilson says improved emergency medical techniques save the lives of thousands who would otherwise have died from collision injuries.

Suicide was ruled the cause of death for 1.22% of the deceased in 1967, rising to 1.54% in 2007. Men killed themselves more frequently than women in both decades, with male-to-female suicide ratios of roughly 3:1 in both eras. Women consistently show a stronger preference for non-violent methods involving self-poisoning and narcotics, whereas men are much more likely to use a firearm, jump from a high place, and so on.

\*Heart attack = “acute myocardial infarction” + “cardiac arrest”, \*\* Stroke = “cerebral infarction” + “stroke”

SOURCES: STATISTICS CANADA/DOMINION BUREAU OF STATISTICS; CANADIAN CANCER SOCIETY; FUNERAL SERVICE ASSOCIATION OF CANADA; CREMATION ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA; ONTARIO FORENSIC PATHOLOGY SERVICE