

The Burden of Chronic Disease in Fresno

Executive Summary

Chronic diseases – long-lasting illnesses, such as asthma, cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and depression – impose a great burden on the Fresno community. Together they comprise Fresno’s number one health threat and the single greatest cause of death and disability. Yet, many chronic diseases are preventable through changes in behavior.

The Burden of Chronic Disease in Fresno, a report by the Altarum Institute, outlines the impact of chronic diseases in Fresno and how unhealthy behaviors are contributing to the crisis.¹

Here are some of the highlights from the report:

Chronic diseases directly affect one of three Fresno County residents.

Chronic illnesses affect a significant portion of people living in Fresno County.

- Approximately 301,000 people – or about one of three Fresnoans (35%) – have been diagnosed with at least one chronic disease.
- Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are among the most prevalent chronic diseases in Fresno: More than one-quarter (27%) of Fresnoans – or 160,000 people – have a diagnosed cardiovascular disease or condition.
- Asthma is the next most commonly diagnosed chronic condition, with about 15% – or 126,000 residents – affected.
- Cancer affects 8% of Fresnoans – or 47,000 people.
- About 7% of Fresnoans – or 44,000 residents – have been diagnosed with diabetes.

Chronic diseases affect many more Fresno area residents indirectly.

The number of people burdened by chronic disease extends beyond those who actually have a diagnosed disease or condition themselves. In reality, entire families are affected when one member has a chronic disease.

- In the Fresno area, four out of five families (79%) have at least one family member with a chronic disease.

The total prevalence of chronic illness is likely much more than 301,000 people because many people with chronic diseases are unaware they have them.

The true prevalence of chronic disease in the Fresno area is difficult to estimate because it includes not only people who have been diagnosed with a disease (i.e., 301,000 people) but also those people who are undiagnosed or are unaware they have a chronic disease.

- A U.S. government survey, which looks at national data, estimates that nearly one-third (31%) of people with diabetes do not know they have it.
- If the rate of undiagnosed diabetes in Fresno is similar to the rest of the U.S., as many as 9,800 people in the Fresno area may be living with undiagnosed diabetes.

Each of the five chronic conditions examined in this report are believed by experts to be under-diagnosed and under-treated, according to multiple health studies and health experts.

¹ *The Burden of Chronic Disease in Fresno* was prepared for America’s Pharmaceutical Companies. For a copy of the full report, visit www.HealthyFresno.org.

Fresno has higher rates of asthma and cancer than the rest of the U.S.

Rates of diagnosed diabetes are about the same as elsewhere in the U.S., while rates of CVD and mental health problems are lower. It should be noted, however, that undiagnosed conditions may be present, and originate from lack of access to health providers who can diagnose conditions and low health literacy. Additionally, mental illnesses are often under-diagnosed by health providers.

Chronic diseases kill about 3,500 people per year in Fresno.

Chronic diseases pose a greater threat to the lives of Fresnoans than any other health problem or safety issue.

- Of all chronic diseases, cardiovascular diseases (CVD) cause the most deaths: Every year about 2,200 Fresnoans die from heart attacks or strokes.
- Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Fresno, killing about 1,100 per year.
- Diabetes kills more than 190 Fresnoans every year.

Chronic diseases affect the quality of life of many more.

Chronic diseases have a great impact on a person's ability to lead a normal life and perform in work or school. For example:

- Asthma is the number one cause of missed school days among children in the U.S.
- Diabetes is the leading cause of non-injury blindness and is responsible for 150 amputations per day in the U.S.
- The burden of living with CVD is so great that close to half of patients are willing to sacrifice years of life to obtain a higher quality of life.
- Major depression is the leading cause of disability among adults in developed nations; it is a leading cause of absenteeism and diminished productivity in the workplace.

Chronic diseases cost the Fresno community \$2 billion dollars every year.

Chronic diseases place an enormous burden on patients and their families, both emotionally and economically. But the impact of chronic diseases does not stop there; it reaches the wider community and economy in many ways, primarily the health care and employment systems.

Chronic disease imposes a steep cost on the Fresno community:

- Every year, approximately \$2 billion dollars is spent on chronic disease.
- These costs include direct expenditures, such as the amount of money spent on health care bills associated with chronic diseases.
- They also include indirect costs, such as the amount of lost productivity and economic activity associated with loss of life and disability related to chronic disease.

If Fresnoans improved their health behaviors, they could reduce the burden of chronic disease in their community.

Right now, too many Fresnoans are not taking advantage of all the ways they can protect and promote their health. Fresno County residents self report many poor health behaviors that put them at risk for chronic disease:

- Almost one-fifth (17%) of the population smokes;
- About three in ten (31%) get no exercise;
- More than one out of three (37%) is obese; and
- Many Fresnoans also fail to get adequate preventive health care.

Though the burden of chronic disease in Fresno is high, there is hope – and opportunity.

If more people practiced healthy behaviors and increased their awareness of chronic disease symptoms and treatment, the burden of disease could be significantly lowered.

- In Fresno County, if all residents practiced healthy behaviors, more than 188,000 people currently suffering from chronic disease could be living healthier lives.
- About 2,800 deaths could be prevented every year.