This region, with 56% of the world’s population (3.8 billion), contributes 44% of all cancer cases (6.4 million out of 14.1 million) and 51% of all cancer deaths (4.3 million out of 8.2 million) globally, with China representing the majority of the cancer burden. Incidence rates vary by almost fourfold, being highest in the Republic of Korea (307.8 per 100,000) and lowest in Bhutan (79.2 per 100,000), and mortality varies by threefold—from the highest in Mongolia (161 per 100,000) to the lowest in Maldives (53.7 per 100,000).

In this region, the cancer burden is dominated by China. The top three cancers in women are breast, lung, and cervical cancers, while the top three causes of cancer death in women are lung, breast, and stomach cancer. In men the top three cancers are lung, stomach, and liver cancers, which are also the top three causes of cancer death.

Due to changes in lifestyle and socio-cultural factors, a decreasing trend was observed for cervical cancer along with an increase in breast cancer in India, Thailand, China, and other countries. Oral cavity cancers are common in many southeastern and southern Asian countries due to the use of smokeless tobacco products. Although decreasing in many countries, stomach cancer rates remain high due to a high prevalence of Helicobacter pylori infection, and possibly due to dietary patterns. Besides the universal modifiable cancer risk factors—tobacco use (smoking and chewable tobacco), unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and alcohol—infected with H. pylori, the liver fluke, indoor air pollution, and suboptimal immunization against hepatitis B are region-specific factors.

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in this region; the other important cancers include oral cavity, stomach, breast, liver and colorectum.

The regional burden of cancer is projected to increase by 41% (from 6.4 million in 2012 to 9 million by 2025) for incidence and 44% for mortality (from 4.3 million to 6.2 million), mainly due to socio-economic growth and the increasing size and aging of the population. Therefore, it is critical that existing health systems are strengthened by appropriate policies and matching funding, not only to cope with the overall needs of treatment, but also to achieve maximal primary prevention and early detection of the most frequent treatable cancers.

Lung cancer has the highest incidence and mortality rates for both sexes combined.

While cervical cancer has been decreasing in Thailand and India, breast cancer has been increasing and is now more common than cervical cancer.

Oral cavity cancer rates are very high in southern and southeastern Asia. Over 50% of oral cavity cancers in India are attributable to smokeless tobacco use.