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VITAL STATISTICS

The Odds It Will Kill You? See New Charts

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR

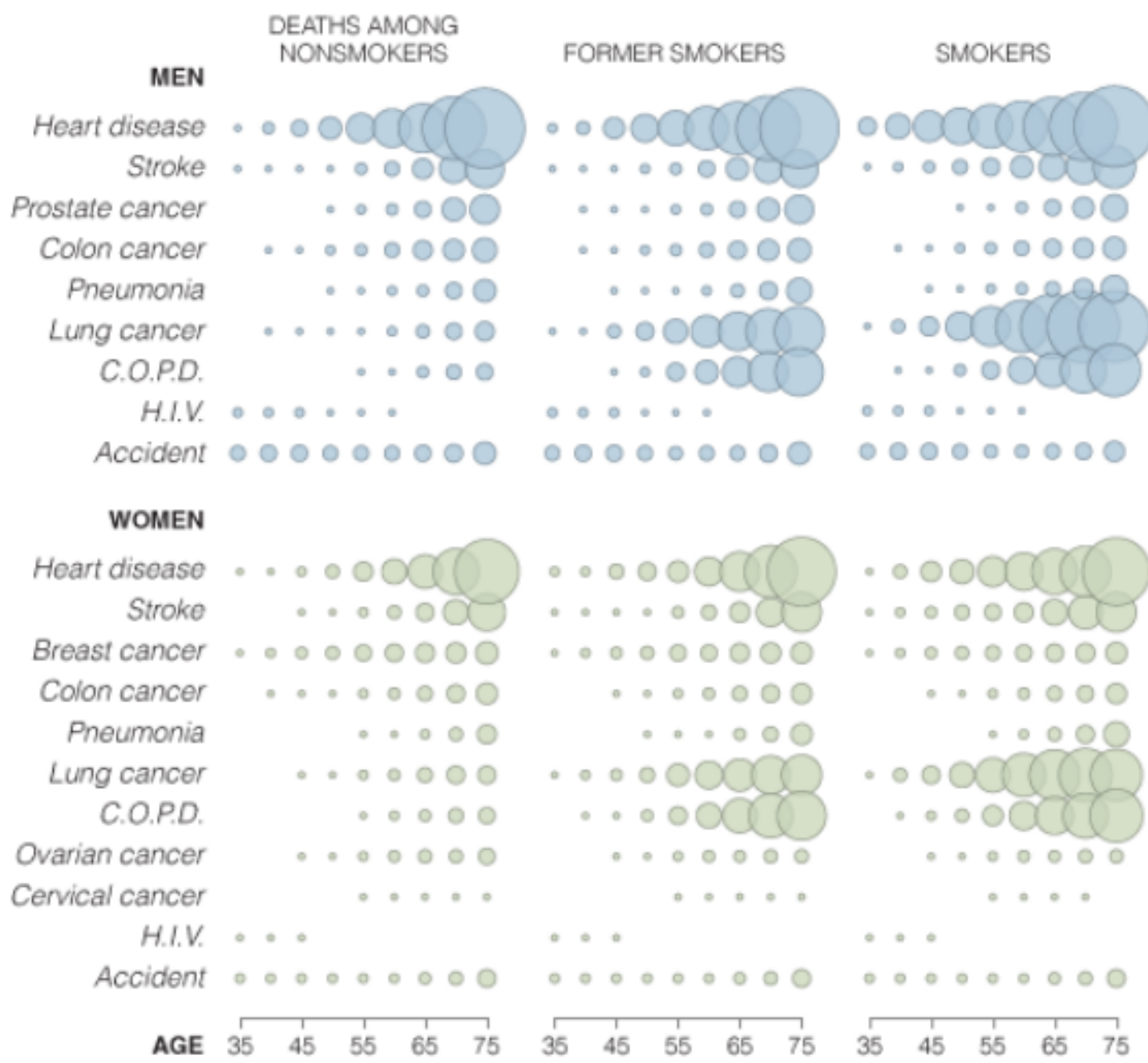
A 55-year-old man who smokes is as likely to die in the next 10 years as a 65-year-old who has never smoked. Less than 1 woman in 1,000 younger than 50 will die in the next decade from [cervical cancer](#). A 35-year-old nonsmoking man is five times as likely to die in an accident before 45 as he is to die of heart disease, and a 35-year-old woman is twice as likely to die accidentally by 45 as she is to die from [breast cancer](#).

New risk charts in a paper published in The Journal of the National Cancer Institute provide a broader perspective than most of the risk calculators on the Internet, because they cover the risks for 10 different causes of death, and for all causes combined, while differentiating by age and between smokers, nonsmokers and former smokers.

At first glance, it may appear that smokers and nonsmokers die of heart disease at the same rate, but a 35-year-old male smoker is seven times as likely to die of heart disease as a nonsmoker the same age. The numbers begin to converge as some smokers survive the more common smokers' diseases, and by age 75, their rate of death from heart disease is almost the same as nonsmokers'.

Dr. Lisa M. Schwartz, a co-author of the paper and an associate professor of medicine at Dartmouth, said people were often presented with statistics intended to frighten them about a particular disease. But a disease may present a large risk to some and very little to others. "These charts allow you to get stats that are about people who are more like you," she said.

Another advantage of the new charts, Dr. Schwartz said, is the 10-year time frame. "Often numbers are presented as lifetime statistics, which make the risk look too large, or as one-year statistics, which make the risk look too small. The charts provide the information you need to understand a risk, and whether to consider taking some action to reduce it." **NICHOLAS BAKALAR**



KEY Circles are scaled in proportion to the number of deaths per 1,000 people over the next 10 years. • 1 ● 10 ● 50 ● 100 DEATHS