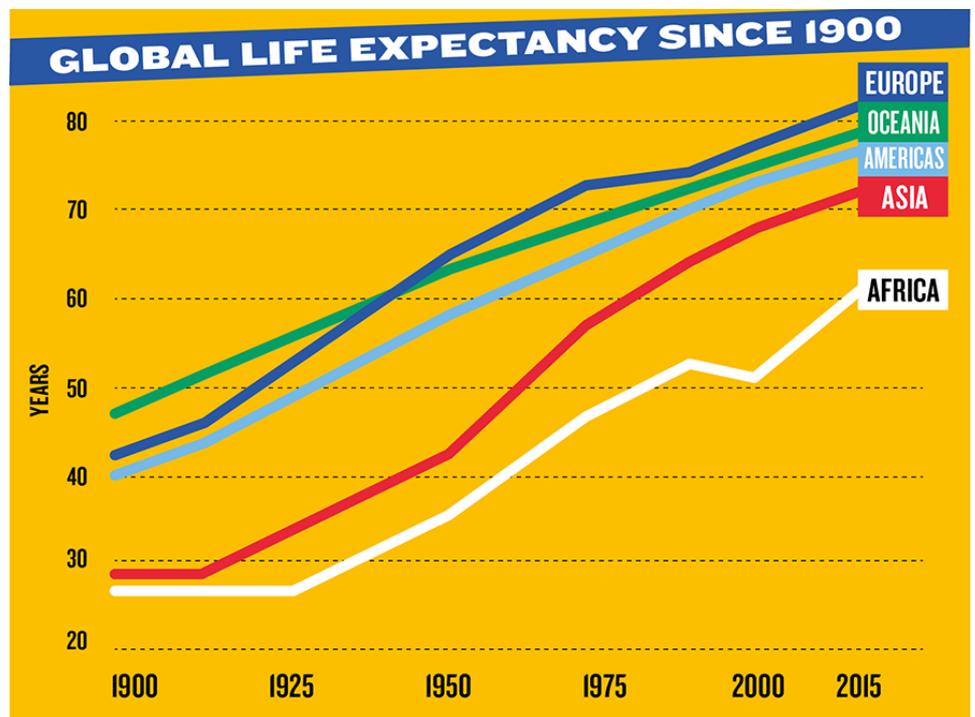


# Why disease could soon be a thing of the past

Can we defeat all disease? Alarmist reports of health crises are common in the news. But behind these stories lie deeper trends which prove that humans have never been so healthy.



Golden years: As of 2015 the average global life expectancy for humans was 71.4 years.

Right now, alarming headlines are warning of a deadly **flu crisis** spreading across the globe. And in recent years, high-profile epidemics of **Ebola** in West Africa and Zika in Brazil have fuelled a seemingly never-ending succession of global health scares.

But for all the lives ravaged by these terrible diseases, countless more are being quietly saved by historic advances in medicine.

Indeed former US president Barack Obama recently declared that “The world has never been healthier.” He claimed that “If you had to choose any moment in history in which to be born, you would choose right now.”

So just how good is medicine getting?

Well, some of the most deadly diseases are slowly being wiped out. Tuberculosis has killed more people than any other infectious disease in history, responsible for over a billion deaths in the last 200 years. Yet since 2000 the global number of deaths has fallen by **37%** – meaning that over 50 million lives have been saved.

Furthermore, since 2005 AIDS deaths have

dropped by half. This is largely down to a huge intergovernmental effort to distribute lifesaving **drugs** to vulnerable areas.

Similarly, a global vaccination drive has almost completely eradicated **polio**, whilst increasingly effective vaccines for **cholera** are also being developed.

But as these highly infectious diseases are eradicated, other “non-communicable” diseases become more prominent. These are illnesses which are not contagious like heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and **chronic respiratory disease**.

Yet even these are becoming less deadly. One study found that globally, premature deaths caused by these four major conditions decreased by 16% between 2000 and 2015. In the USA cancer deaths alone fell by 23% between 1991 and 2012 – saving 1.7 million lives.

This particular trend has less to do with wonder drugs or big international health programmes, but more subtle social changes. Fewer people smoke, and greater cancer

awareness leads to people going for check-ups more regularly.

But can these trends lead to a world free from disease?

## Gut feeling

It is possible, some say. A century ago, the idea of totally eradicating polio would have seemed ridiculous. But through cooperation, ingenious research, and sheer force of will, we have almost done it. Nothing stops us from attempting the same thing with more diseases – particularly with so many lives at stake.

Diseases could actually get worse, others respond. With **antibiotic resistance** increasing, the day may come when super-resistant bugs will devastate human populations. Furthermore, we must focus less on cures and more on the causes of disease. Simple things like better access to clean water would save countless lives.

## Q & A

**Q: What do we know?**

A: The prevalence of some diseases varies significantly between regions of the world. For example, in the USA in 2016 there were 2.9

cases of tuberculosis per 100,000 people. By contrast, in 2015 Sub-Saharan Africa recorded 276 cases per 100,000 people.

**Q: What do we not know?**

A: For some major diseases there is still no known cure. For example, HIV medication is

designed to manage the symptoms and prevent the sufferer from developing AIDS. Other major diseases without cures include Ebola, Alzheimer's, and Diabetes.



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## READING HOMEWORK

1. Is it possible to eradicate all the diseases in the world? Explain your thinking.

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2. Would a world without disease be a completely good thing? Explain.

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