

Dikembe Mutombo, NBA Legend and Global Humanitarian, Dies of Brain Cancer

The 58-year-old basketball All-Star nicknamed “Mt. Mutombo” began treatment for a brain tumor in 2022.

October 2, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Basketball Hall of Famer Dikembe Mutombo died of [brain cancer](#) September 30 at age 58 surrounded by family, the NBA announced.

In October 2022, Mutombo’s family shared that he had a [brain tumor](#) and was undergoing treatment in Atlanta. The eight-time NBA All-Star and four-time Defensive Player of the Year will be remembered for his incredible athleticism and impactful humanitarian work.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by NBA History (@nbahistory)

Brain cancer is uncommon, and the lifetime risk of developing a malignant tumor of the brain or spinal cord is less than 1%. About 25,400 brain and spinal cord cancers are diagnosed in the United States each year, and about 18,760 people die of these cancers annually, according to the [American Cancer Society](#).

Nicknamed “Mt. Mutombo,” the 7-foot-2 [finger-wagging center](#) played for the Denver Nuggets, Atlanta Hawks, Philadelphia 76ers, New York Knicks, New Jersey Nets and Houston Rockets throughout his career. He played in the NBA for 18 and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2015.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Denver Nuggets (@nuggets)

“Dikembe Mutombo was simply larger than life,” NBA commissioner Adam Silver wrote. “On the court, he was one of the greatest shot blockers and defensive players in the history of the NBA. Off the floor, he poured his heart and soul into helping others.”

After retiring, Mutombo devoted his time to charitable and humanitarian causes across Africa, including improving health, education and quality of life for people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he and his nine siblings were born.

Mutombo's humanitarian work earned him the NBA's J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award in 2001 and 2009. In 1999, he was one of 20 winners of the President's Service Awards, the country's highest honor for volunteer service.

He served as the NBA's first global ambassador as well as on the boards of many organizations, including Special Olympics International and the National Board for the U.S. Fund for UNICEF.

"There was nobody more qualified than Dikembe to serve as the NBA's first global ambassador," Silver said. "He was a humanitarian at his core. He loved what the game of basketball could do to make a positive impact on communities, especially in his native Democratic Republic of the Congo and across the continent of Africa."



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Philadelphia 76ers (@sixers)



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Atlanta Hawks (@athawks)

Mutombo also inspired a new generation of athletes, including Philadelphia 76ers star Joel Embiid, who was born in Cameroon.

“It’s a sad day, especially for us Africans, and really the whole world,” Embiid said in a press conference Monday. “Other than what he’s accomplished on the basketball court, I think he was even better off the court. He’s one of the guys that I look up to, as far as having an impact, not just on the court, but off the court. He’s done a lot of great things. He did a lot of great things for a lot of people. He was a role model of mine. It is a sad day.”

In a social media tribute, Dikembe’s son Ryan Mutombo said his father “loved others with every ounce of his being.” He called his dad his hero “because he simply cared.”

“He remains the purest heart I have ever known,” Ryan wrote.

To learn more about [#Brain Cancer](#), go to [Cancer Health’s Basics on Brain Cancer](#). It reads in part:

What are the risk factors for brain cancer?

Many types of brain cancer have no known risk factor, and in most cases, there is no clear cause. Genetic factors, environmental toxins, radiation to the head and cigarette smoking have all been linked to cancers of the brain and spinal cord. Some inherited diseases, such as neurofibromatosis and retinoblastoma, increase the risk for central nervous system tumors. HIV infection is also associated with an increased risk for some brain cancers.

What are the symptoms of brain cancer?

Many brain tumors do not cause symptoms. Some are found accidentally when brain imaging with a computed tomography (CT) or MRI scan is done for another reason. When symptoms do occur, they vary depending on which part of the brain or spinal cord is affected. Common symptoms may include:

- Headache
- Weakness or paralysis
- Nausea or vomiting
- Clumsiness or lack of coordination
- Difficulty walking
- Seizures
- Changes in vision, hearing, touch or taste
- Speech problems
- Mood, personality or behavior changes
- Mental confusion, trouble concentrating or memory problems.

Many people with brain cancer do not develop symptoms until its late stages, when it is harder to treat.

How is brain cancer diagnosed?

Early detection and treatment of brain cancer increases the likelihood of long-term survival. Diagnosing brain cancer starts with a physical exam and health history. Often, brain imaging with a CT scan will be ordered. This is an imaging technique that uses X-rays to create a three-dimensional map of the brain. Sometimes an MRI scan is done as well. Other tests may be ordered, such as blood and urine tests, to determine what other health issues may be present.

