CDC: COVID-19 Was Third Leading Cause of Death in 2020

Estimates show that more than 300,000 people died of COVID-19 in 2020.

January 11, 2021 By Alicia Green

Since emerging in late 2019, COVID-19 has killed almost 2 million people. Now, statisticians at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveal that the highly contagious respiratory illness was, in fact, one of the leading causes of death in the United States in 2020, reports CNN.

After looking at provisional data from 2020, CDC statisticians reported there were between 316,252 and 431,792 deaths beyond the expected number, known as excess deaths. These data showed that over 310,000 deaths were associated with COVID-19, placing it third among the leading causes of death in 2020.

According to the mathematicians, there was enough distance between the number of U.S. deaths caused by cancer (the second leading cause of death in 2019) and those caused by unintentional injuries (the fourth leading cause of mortality in 2019) to conclude that COVID-19 fell at number three on the list in 2020. Heart disease was still the leading cause of death in the United States.

During the week of December 5, researchers at the University of Washington said COVID-19 had actually surpassed ischemic heart disease as the leading cause of death in America that week, reported NBC News. (At that point, the virus had killed 1,096 more people than the cardiovascular disease.)

Overall, 2020 was one of the deadliest years in American history because of COVID-19, according to The Associated Press (AP). The news agency projected that 3.2 million total deaths occurred last year, based on preliminary data. Deaths increased by nearly 15% but that figure is expected to rise once all December deaths are tallied.

“That would mark the largest single-year percentage leap since 1918, when tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers died in World War I and hundreds of thousands of Americans died in a flu pandemic,” the AP wrote. “Deaths rose 46% that year, compared with 1917.”

Complete data for deaths in 2020 won’t be available for months, but experts suggest that COVID-19 directly and indirectly impacted U.S deaths last year.

For related coverage, read “Lie of the Year: The Downplay and Denial of the Coronavirus” and “Many US Health Experts Underestimated the Coronavirus…Until It Was Too Late.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.covidhealth.com/article/cdc-covid19-third-leading-cause-death-2020