

# COVID-19 is now the leading cause of death in the U.S.

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COVID-19 is now the leading cause of death in the United States, according to an editorial published Thursday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The opinion piece, written by three researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University, cites current daily mortality rates to show that COVID-19 has now surpassed [heart disease](#) and cancer as the leading daily cause of death in the U.S.

"It's been a long time since an infectious disease was the leading cause of death for the whole country," said lead author Steven Woolf, M.D., director emeritus of VCU's Center on Society and Health. "And it's a tragic milestone we could've prevented."

By October, COVID-19 was the third-leading cause of death for people ages 45 to 84 and the second-leading cause of death for those over 85. But those numbers were an aggregate of the previous eight months.

Since November, the weekly average for daily

COVID-19 deaths has tripled, from 826 to 2,430 deaths per day, writes Woolf. Heart disease and cancer, which have been the leading causes of death for decades, cause approximately 1,700 and 1,600 deaths per day, respectively.

"There were surges in the spring and summer that targeted specific regions of the country, but nothing like the national surge we're seeing right now," Woolf said.

The editorial gives context to the rising death counts reported in the news. According to Woolf, the current death rate from COVID-19 is the equivalent of 15 airplanes crashing every day, each carrying 150 passengers.

"There's a daily drumbeat of statistics that people see on TV every day, and they become numb to it," said Woolf, who serves in a community engagement role with the C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research. "On TV it's numbers, but every one of those cases is a mother, a father, a brother, or a sister who's died."

And Woolf writes that the numbers may underestimate the threat of COVID-19. For one, the rates of infection are climbing, and the more the virus spreads, the more people it will infect.

Perhaps more importantly, the numbers don't include the excess deaths uncounted for by the official death tallies. Reporting delays, miscodings and deaths caused by disruptions created by the pandemic could put the actual numbers 20% higher than publicly reported ones, Woolf writes.

Disruptions mean secondary health effects, such as delayed surgeries, missed doctor appointments, the socioeconomic impact of isolation and job loss and more, that have led to higher death rates by causes other than COVID-19 in previous years.

"The point is that this loss of life is preventable. Looking in the rearview mirror, so many of the deaths that have already occurred could have been avoided," said Woolf, a professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Population Health at the VCU School of Medicine.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

"Looking ahead offers the hope of the vaccine, but it's not coming fast enough to save the people who are dying now," Woolf said. "It's urgent for Americans to get serious about wearing masks, social distancing and avoiding large gatherings, or else we're going to see more alarming numbers and COVID-19 will remain a leading cause of death for far too long."

Derek Chapman, Ph.D., interim director of the Center on Society and Health, and Jong Hyung Lee, a graduate assistant at the center and Ph.D. candidate of VCU's Division of Epidemiology in the Department of Family Medicine and Population Health, joined Woolf as authors of the article.

The opinion piece is the culmination of a summer's worth of research by Woolf, Chapman and their fellow researchers at the center. It follows up on a *JAMA* research letter published in October reporting that for every two deaths attributed to COVID-19 in the U.S., a third American dies as a result of the pandemic. The October data built on a July research letter, also published in *JAMA*, that showed excess deaths brought on by the pandemic in March and April.

"One American is dying of COVID-19 every 40 seconds now," said Peter Buckley, M.D., dean of the VCU School of Medicine. "Dr. Woolf, Dr. Chapman and the team at the Center on Society and Health have diligently cataloged the tragic consequences of the pandemic this summer. That this virus is the leading cause of [death](#) in the U.S. is a sobering milestone that I hope reinforces to all Americans the importance of following safety protocols."

**More information:** COVID-19 as the Leading Cause of Death in the United States. *JAMA*. Published online December 17, 2020. [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2020.24865](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.24865)

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