



## Public Health Brief

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The current exponential increase in coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is reaching a calamitous scale in the USA, potentially overwhelming the healthcare system and causing substantial loss of life. The news media dutifully report each day's increase in new cases and deaths but putting these numbers in perspective may be difficult. **The daily US mortality rate for COVID-19 deaths is equivalent to the 11 Sep 2001 attacks, which claimed 2988 lives, occurring every 1.5 days, or 15 Airbus 320 jetliners, each carrying 150 passengers, crashing every day. Since December 9<sup>th</sup>, more than 2 persons have been dying from COVID-19 every minute.**

A helpful approach to put the effects of the pandemic in context is to compare COVID-19-related mortality rates with the leading causes of death that, under ordinary circumstances, would pose the greatest threat to different age-groups. By October 2020 COVID-19 had become the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of death for persons aged 45 through 84 years and the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death for those aged 85 years or older. Adults 45 years or older were more likely to die from COVID-19 during those months than from chronic lower respiratory disease, transport accidents (e.g., motor vehicle fatalities), drug overdoses, suicide, or homicide. In contrast, for individuals younger than age 45 years, other causes of death, such as drug overdoses, suicide, transport accidents, cancer, and homicide exceeded those from COVID-19.

Especially for older adults, the threat from COVID-19 may be even greater, for 3 reasons. First, the data does



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not represent the current mortality rate, which has been increasing rapidly. Between 1 Nov 2020, and 13 Dec 2020, the 7-day moving average for daily COVID-19 deaths **tripled**, from 826 to 2430 deaths per day, and if this trend is unabated will soon surpass the daily rate observed at the height of the spring surge (2856 deaths per day on 21 Apr 2020). As occurred in the spring, COVID-19 has become the leading cause of death in the USA. Daily mortality rates for heart disease and cancer, which for decades have been the 2 leading causes of death, are approximately 1700 and 1600 deaths per day, respectively. With COVID-19 mortality rates now exceeding these thresholds, this infectious disease has become deadlier than heart disease and cancer, and its lethality may increase further as transmission increases with holiday travel and gatherings and with the intensified indoor exposure that winter brings. Age makes a major difference in mortality risk. Compared with those aged 18 through 29 years, **people between the ages of 75 and 84 years and those 85 years or older have 200 times and 630 times greater average death rates, respectively.**

Second, the reported number of COVID-19 deaths underestimates the excess deaths produced by the pandemic. Due to reporting delays and miscoding of COVID-19 deaths and an increase in non-COVID-19 deaths caused by disruptions produced by the pandemic, excess deaths are estimated to be 20% higher than publicly reported COVID-19 death counts.

Third, COVID-19 is unlike other causes of death because it is communicable; individuals who die from homicide or cancer do not transmit the risk of morbidity or mortality to those nearby. Every COVID-19 death signals the possibility of more deaths among close contacts.

The failure of the public and its leaders to take adequate steps to prevent viral transmission has made the nation more vulnerable, allowing COVID-19 to become the leading cause of death in the USA, particularly among those aged 35 years or older. Much of this escalation was preventable, as is true for many deaths to come. The prospect of a vaccine offers hope for 2021, but that solution will not come soon enough to avoid catastrophic increases in COVID-19-related hospitalizations and deaths. **The need for the entire population to take the disease seriously -- notably to wear masks and maintain social distance -- could not be more urgent.**

Source: Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) [edited]  
<<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2774465>>

**Tragically, more than 20,000 families will have an empty seat at their holiday tables this year.**

**Our cherished extended family traditions can wait. This year, the most important gift we can give our loved ones is protection against COVID-19, and that means staying apart.**

**If I don't see you this Christmas, it's because I love you more.**

**Please watch this: <https://youtu.be/Su-spLPHe5U>**



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