

# COVID-19 Is Likely to Be the Third-Leading Cause of Death in the U.S. This Year



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New projections show weekly COVID-19 death tolls of more than 10,000 this month in the United States. Getty Images

- New estimates are projecting the number of COVID-19 deaths could top 180,000 in the United States by the end of August.

- At that pace, the viral illness would be the third-leading cause of death in the United States in 2020, behind only cancer and heart disease.
- Experts say the only way to reverse the trend is for people to strictly observe guidelines, such as physical distancing and facial coverings.

The news about COVID-19 deaths is grim and projected to get even worse.

So far, more than 155,000 people in the United States have died from COVID-19 in just 5 months.

A new estimate

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from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) projects that the weekly death toll in the United States could reach 11,000 by the end of August.

At that pace, experts say the viral illness is on track to become the third-leading cause of death in the United States in 2020.

The latest CDC statistics

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show the projected COVID-19 death toll would only trail cancer and heart disease. It would surpass accidental deaths.

“It’s stunning,” Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, told [name removed]. “This is the most striking demographic change since HIV/AIDS.”

## By the numbers

The latest projections indicate the death toll will likely rise rapidly.

Yahoo News recently uncovered an internal CDC document dated July 28. It predicts the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 will top 180,000 by Aug. 22.

Just a few days ago, researchers at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington released their latest estimate on COVID-19 deaths.

Based on current projections, they’re forecasting that 230,000 Americans could be dead by Nov. 1.

“Unfortunately, that is the track we’re on,” said Ali Mokdad, PhD, a professor of global health at the IHME.

“We have pretty much totally relaxed some of our social distancing mandates because there is a big concern about the economy,” Mokdad told [name removed]. “Some states have [reinstated] some of these measures, but it’s not enough to contain the virus because all of us are susceptible.”

“These are not just numbers. These are loved ones, family members, essential workers who sustain our economy,” he added.

## Historical perspective

“The only precedent I can recall is when AIDS hit the scene. At the time, the death rate for young men aged 20 to 40 was very low, then it shot up like a rocket,” Schaffner said. “At the time, that was the most stunning demographic change in two generations of looking at that data.”

“AIDS has settled in and everything went down because of our treatments,” Schaffner noted. “Now, much faster than HIV/AIDS, comes this virus that is taking all ages and rocketing it up.”

“If we were to analyze the data by subgroups, age, race, and ethnicity, I think we would see similar increases that would also be striking,” he added. “The change for people of color might be even more dramatic because that group has been disproportionately affected.”

Historians are still studying the 1918 flu pandemic

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to learn about the impact the high death toll had on society.

“There are things that were very, very different back then,” said Mari Webel, PhD, a medical historian and an assistant professor in the department of history at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania.

“In 1918-19, the seasonal influenza eventually tapered off on its own. Everything I understand about our current situation is that is unlikely,” Webel told [name removed].

“One thing to consider is we’re still in the middle of this thing. Some of the impact in terms of cause of death won’t really be clear until further down the line,” she added.

“We are only months into a totally novel coronavirus disease. It is unprecedented and it is serious,” she said. “And there are no cookie-cutter experiences we can look to.”

## The path forward

“If all the data are not sufficiently sobering, it calls to attention once again that profoundly, sadly, we continue to not have a national strategy for controlling this virus,” Schaffner said.

“We’re not going to get control of this virus until we can all sing from the same page,” he added. “And our national leaders are doing nil to bring us together.”

“We haven’t done a good job so far containing the virus,” Mokdad said. “We have to be very careful. We cannot sustain this level of mortality.”

“It’s very frustrating when you put out these projections and you tell people to wear a mask,” he explained. “We can save lives and save our economy if we do the right thing.”

Mokdad says the virus has already changed the way we live. The way we shop, our education, our vacations are all different.

It also has left many people isolated.

“We sacrificed a lot as a country when we locked down the first time,” he said. “Those sacrifices, especially those who paid the highest price, should not be wasted.”