

# The 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic and Dementia: Deaths Above Average **Technical Explanation**



As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is reporting deaths above average<sup>1</sup> for a select number of diseases, including Alzheimer's disease and dementia. To calculate this, the number of deaths due to Alzheimer's disease and dementia are averaged over the last five years to create an expected number of deaths through the end of September. Then, the total number of deaths to date in 2020 is compared to this average, resulting in the number of deaths above average.

Through the end of September, there have been at least 31,047 deaths due to Alzheimer's or another dementia in excess of the average.<sup>2</sup> This means that to this point in the year, there have been 16.6% more deaths from Alzheimer's disease and dementia than average. This significant trend could be due to one or more of the following factors:

- A lack of easy and accessible COVID-19 testing, especially early in the pandemic, that caused COVID-19 deaths to be inaccurately recorded as deaths due to other causes (such as Alzheimer's disease).
- The high prevalence of Alzheimer's and other dementias in settings that were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including nursing homes and assisted living facilities.
- Indirect causes due to the pandemic, including overburdened health care systems, fear of seeking treatment, or other causes related to economic shut-downs and stay-at-home orders.
- A trend in dementia deaths not accounted for in the five-year average. That is, some part of these deaths could be attributable to a trend of increasing Alzheimer's and dementia deaths that is not related to the COVID-19 pandemic (although the number appears higher than would be the case if this were the only reason).

This data indicate that the true burden of the COVID-19 pandemic is significantly larger than the confirmed COVID-19 deaths, especially for individuals living with Alzheimer's or another dementia. As more data continue to be released, further examination of the effect of the pandemic on dementia mortality will be warranted.

For questions or more information, please contact Raza Lamb, Senior Specialist of Health Policy, at [rlamb@alz-aim.org](mailto:rlamb@alz-aim.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Many often refer to this as "excess deaths." From an epidemiological standpoint, "excess deaths" is a similar concept but is calculated in a slightly different way. The CDC does not provide data on "excess deaths" by specific diseases.

<sup>2</sup> Mortality data reported in Facts and Figures is for deaths where the underlying cause is Alzheimer's disease only. The data here also include deaths where the underlying cause is vascular dementia, Lewy bodies dementia, frontotemporal dementia, Pick's disease, and unspecified dementia.

