HOST: Each quarter NCHS releases [provisional data](#) on mortality from leading causes of death in the U.S. on an interactive web-based dashboard.   This week the dashboard was updated to include Quarter 4 data from 2020 and gives a complete account of provisional death rates in the U.S. for the year. Joining us to discuss some of the key findings is Farida Ahmad of the Division of Vital Statistics.

HOST: First question: how much did the death rate in the U.S. increase in 2020?

FARIDA AHMAD: The death rate for the U.S. increased by about 16% in 2020 compared to 2019-

HOST: Now is it safe to say that almost all of the increase can be attributed to COVID-19.

FARIDA AHMAD: A large part of it, yes, but we also saw increases in other causes of death like heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, and diabetes. Unintentional injuries like drug overdose also increased throughout 2020. This report only includes drug overdose rates for the first half of the year but you do see very large increases in the second quarter of 2020.

HOST: Some say that certain causes of death like influenza and pneumonia declined in 2020 due to COVID - is that true?

FARIDA AHMAD: No, not really - that's due to influenza and pneumonia were actually higher in 2020 than in 2019. That's likely driven by the pneumonia more so than influenza though.

HOST: Is there any sense whether some of those pneumonia deaths are miscategorized, that maybe they should be in the COVID category?

FARIDA AHMAD: Yes, you know it's definitely possible. We don't have hard numbers on that and to account for maybe miscategorized COVID deaths we would we would look at excess mortality. So a different kind of measure to look at that.

HOST: I guess then the same would be true for other causes of death, particularly those that occur at the very beginning of 2020. Is there any chance there will be more COVID deaths added to the tally?

FARIDA AHMAD: It's certainly possible but we haven't closed out the 2020 data year. So we could still get additional changes but we don't anticipate a significant number of deaths data will change.

HOST: So the data aren't final yet is that correct?

FARIDA AHMAD: Yes that's correct.

HOST: So what are some of the more striking changes you saw in the death rates from 2019 to 2020 as far as certain leading causes go?

FARIDA AHMAD: Diabetes deaths increased by almost 14%... Chronic liver disease increased by 17% … and then hypertension and Parkinson disease those increased by 12% and 11% respectively.

HOST: So in a normal year those would be considered very large increases is that correct?

FARIDA AHMAD: Yes, yeah shifts that large would be notable.

HOST: But there's no way to sort of link that back to the pandemic, either directly or indirectly?

FARIDA AHMAD: Not with the death certificate data that we have, unless these deaths - you know these deaths which were the underlying cause is what we're looking at. For these deaths COVID-19 might also be listed on the death certificate, in which case you could say that COVID-19 played a role in that death but otherwise we wouldn't necessarily know if it was a direct or indirect cause of the pandemic in terms of disrupted access to healthcare or other contributing factors. The death certificate data wouldn't necessarily tell us that.

HOST: So in general 2020 was a very rough year for mortality but were there any declines in leading causes of death in 2020?

FARIDA AHMAD: There were a few - there were declines in cancer, in chronic lower respiratory diseases, and pneumonitis due to solids and liquids>

HOST: Did the pandemic – did COVID-19 -- have any impact on death rates at the state level? Were there any unusual changes in 2020?

FARIDA AHMAD: West Virginia and Mississippi had the highest death rates overall, but the largest increases in death rates were actually seen in New York and New Jersey.

HOST: Is there anything else in this new data that you'd like to note?

FARIDA AHMAD: What this report allows us to look at is not just the deaths due to COVID-19, which have been understandably a huge focus of public health surveillance in last year, but with this report we get to look at some of the other leading causes of death that might not be in the top five, or the top ten, but these are issues of public health importance and concern. To look at these various diseases and causes of death, so I think that's really what this report adds is to be able to take a broader look.

MUSICAL BRIDGE:

HOST: Our thanks to Farida Ahmad for joining us on this edition of "Statcast."

HOST: On Wednesday of this week, NCHS also released a new report on screening for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer. The study featured data on women age 45 and over from the National Health Interview Survey, and concluded that regular cancer screening is much more likely among women of higher socio-economic status, as well as women who are married or

living with a partner, and women who engage in healthy behaviors -- such as not smoking, regularly exercising, and getting a flu shot.