Overview

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is the nation's principal health statistics agency, providing data to identify and address health issues. NCHS compiles statistical information to help guide public health and health policy decisions. These health statistics allow NCHS to:

- Document the health status of the U.S. population and selected subgroups
- Document access to and use of the health care system
- Identify disparities in health status and use of health care by race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, other population characteristics, and geographic region
- Track the impact of major policy initiatives
- Monitor trends in health indicators
- Support biomedical and health services research
- Provide data to support public policies and programs, including recent data on opioid overdose deaths

NCHS, a federal statistical agency

Underlying NCHS’ mission and legislative mandate is the principle that the data collected with public funds, or under the umbrella of a public agency, are considered a “public good.” The primary considerations for the timely release of NCHS data are:

- Protection of the confidentiality of respondents
- Accessibility of resources required to create public-use files and tabulations
- Data-quality, analytic, or data-processing issues that may limit the ability to make public-use data or tabulations available

In addition to providing data for public use, the agency works to provide objective independent analysis and interpretation of the data it collects through reports and other statistical products.

Health indicators

NCHS produces data on a wide range of health indicators that have important uses for public health, such as:

- Accurate, relevant, and timely data to monitor and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Health insurance coverage and its relationship to access to and the use of health care services
- Prevalence of health conditions, such as obesity and overweight, cholesterol, hypertension, and HIV status among the U.S. population
- Functional status and disability
- Exposure to environmental hazards that shape policy, such as exposure to lead
- Physical activity and nutrition
- Growth charts that are used by health care providers to monitor the development of children
- Care quality and patient safety
- Injuries and their impact on health status and functioning
- Leading causes of death specific to age, race and ethnicity, and sex groups
- Infant mortality, stillbirths, life expectancy, and teen births
- Practice of medicine in the United States and evolution of health information technology
- Changes in the health care delivery system, including emergency department use and capacity; increasing use of prescription drugs; and increasing demand for community-based long-term care

NCHS data sources

Collaborating with other public and private health partners, NCHS uses a variety of data collection mechanisms to obtain accurate information from multiple sources. This process provides a broad perspective to help the organization understand the population’s health, influences on health, and health outcomes.
Guidance for Certifying Deaths Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19)

Introduction

In December 2019, an outbreak of a respiratory disease now called COVID–19 occurred in Wuhan, the city of 11 million people in central China. The virus spread worldwide and on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19) a pandemic (1). The first case in the United States was reported in January 2020 (3) and the first death in the United States was reported in February 2020 (4), both in Washington State. Since then, the number of reported cases in the United States has increased and on March 18, 2020, the White House announced a 14-day national distancing guide to slow the spread of COVID–19.

When reporting cause of death on a death certificate, it is important to communicate clearly and accurately with public health officials and other stakeholders in order to better understand the effects of this pandemic and appropriately direct public health response.

In public health emergencies, mortality surveillance provides crucial information about population-level disease progression, as well as guides the development of public health interventions (5). Mortality data allow dissemination of critical information to help ensure that the public and key stakeholders remain well-informed. One of the most important methods of mortality surveillance is through monitoring causes of death on death certificates. Cause-of-death data allow identification of disease trends and assessment of their impact. Monitoring and analysis of cause-of-death data over time (https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/index.htm) can be integral to detecting elevated levels of influenza activity in real time and guiding public health response. Accurate and timely death certificate data are also crucial to evaluating the effects of this pandemic and appropriately directing public health response.

New directions

As the nation’s principal statistical agency, NCHS continues to improve its ability to strategically collect, use, and share data across government and with the research community, and to provide policy makers with more comprehensive and objective data. NCHS will expand innovative techniques and alternative approaches, ensuring that the agency is well-positioned to meet the need for timely and relevant health data now and in the future.