Fact check: CDC's estimates COVID-19 death rate around 0.26%, doesn't confirm it

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The claim: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has confirmed a 0.2% death rate for COVID-19

Commentary on the severity and death toll of the coronavirus has been constant on social media throughout the pandemic.

Recent claims have cited the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's release of a guidance document that included new estimates about the virus, including the death rate.

"The CDC just confirmed a .2% death rate for COVID-19," says a May 25 post by Facebook user Bill Faudel, which lists many effects of the virus, including rising unemployment and its impacts on the economy and mental health.

Many comments on the post, which had more than 140 shares as of Friday, imply the death rate doesn't justify the measures taken to combat the virus's spread, which include closures of businesses and government-issued stay-at-home orders.

"Choose your own fear, but please stop forcing your fears on me," the post says.

Faudel told USA TODAY he believes too many deaths from other causes were given the title "COVID-19 death" because someone tested positive at the time of death.

The claim that the CDC has confirmed that death rate has been widely shared across Facebook and Instagram.

But experts say the overall death toll has more likely been an undercount due to some people who have died without receiving a test or falsely testing negative for the disease.

And the CDC's published death rate estimates fall in a range and aren't inclusive of preventative actions taken.

What is the CDC's COVID-19 death rate estimate?

The U.S. death toll due to COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the novel coronavirus, surpassed 100,000 on May 27. On Thursday, Johns Hopkins Medical Center's COVID-19 tracking map showed more than 1.8 million confirmed cases and more than 107,000 deaths in the U.S.

In May, the CDC published a document titled "Pandemic Planning Scenarios," with estimates about the virus to help modelers and public health officials. It included estimates of the death rate for infected people who show symptoms and of the percentage of people who were infected but asymptomatic.

The CDC document stressed the values are estimates, not predictions of the effects of the virus, and don't reflect the impact of changes in behavior or social distancing.

"New data on COVID-19 is available daily," the document said. "Information about its biological and epidemiological characteristics remain limited, and uncertainty remains around nearly all parameter values."

The document includes five scenarios. The first four are varying estimates of the disease's severity, from low to high, while the fifth represents the "current best estimate."

The range of estimates put the fatality rate for those showing symptoms between 0.2%-1%, with a "best estimate" of 0.4%.

It also places the number of asymptomatic cases between 20%-50%, with a "best estimate" of 35%.

By combining the two estimates, the estimated overall fatality rate of those infected with the virus – with and without symptoms – would be 0.26%.

According to NPR, the CDC has revised the estimate downward from its estimate in mid-April. Internal versions of the CDC scenario documents acquired by the Center for Public Integrity show that on April 14, the CDC had estimated a 0.33% fatality rate. That was up from a March 31 estimate of 0.16%.

Some experts say CDC estimate is too low

Some scientists have said the death rate is likely higher than the CDC estimate. University of Washington biologist Carl Bergstrom, a modeling and computer simulation expert, told CNN on May 22 that he disagreed with the number in the report.

"While most of these numbers are reasonable, the mortality rates shade far too low," he said.

Harvard University epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch told the "80,000 Hours" podcast in a May 18 episode that he believes the fatality rate is "clearly above 0.2% and probably above 0.4%," likely lying somewhere between 0.2%-1.5%.

"I would put most of my money in the intermediate range," he said.

Lipsitch said because the mortality rate varies based on a person's medical risks, finding the rate can be a challenge because sampling cases incorrectly can throw off the calculation.

Infectious diseases physician and epidemiologist Dr. Michael Calderwood told USA TODAY that he also believes the rate should be around 0.5%. He pointed to a May 14 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association that looked at the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship outbreak and found the death rate, adjusted for age, was around that number.

"I think that's in line with what I think a lot of people are estimating at this point," he said.

Like Lipsitch, he said calculating an overall case fatality rate is a challenge due to a variety of factors, including incomplete testing, incomplete tabulation of the number of COVID-19 deaths and differing fatality rates by age.

"Places like Italy, they had an older population in general," he said. "Some of their higher mortality rates were actually based on the skew in their population towards those that were more likely to die."

Early models showed more drastic death rates, but that rate has come into an increasingly clearer focus as scientists have been able to examine more data on the coronavirus, he said.

Serological studies that test for antibodies will eventually give a better picture of the virus's fatality rate, Calderwood said. With the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, it took a few years to understand the full picture, he said.

But 0.5% is still a large number if the virus ends up being exposed to a high number of people, he said. That would be more than 1.6 million deaths if the virus spread to the entire U.S. population of approximately 329 million.

Our ruling: Partly false

It is true that the CDC has reported the possibility of a 0.2% death rate for the coronavirus. More specifically, the CDC in its "Pandemic Planning Scenarios" document estimated the death rate was about 0.26%, a number calculated by combining the CDC estimates for the death rate for symptomatic cases and the number of infected people who have no symptoms.

But that number lies within a range of estimates. Saying the CDC has "confirmed" that as the death rate paints a misleading picture because the CDC has clearly stated the number is subject to change. For those reasons, we rate this claim PARTLY FALSE.

Our fact-check sources:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** COVID-19 Pandemic Planning Scenarios
- **Johns Hopkins University of Medicine:** Coronavirus resource center
- **USA TODAY:** U.S. hits 100,000 deaths from coronavirus as states continue to cautiously reopen
- **Journal of the American Medical Association:** Assessment of deaths from COVID-19 and from seasonal influenza
- **Washington Post:** 'Tell me what to do! Please!': Even experts struggle with coronavirus unknowns
- **"80,000 Hours" podcast:** Top epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch on whether we're winning or losing against COVID-19
- **CNN:** CDC estimates that 35% of coronavirus patients don't have symptoms
- **NPR:** Scientists say new, lower CDC estimates for severity of COVID-19 are optimistic

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