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- Nearly 100,000 more deaths involving heart conditions and stroke than usual since pandemic began

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22 June 2023 BHF Press Office

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Nearly 100,000 more people with cardiovascular disease than expected have died since the start of the pandemic in England, according to our analysis published today.

It means that, on average, there have been over 500 additional deaths a week involving cardiovascular disease, since the pandemic began.

There are likely many contributing factors, including extreme and widespread pressure on NHS services and Covid-19.

There have been more excess deaths involving cardiovascular conditions than any other disease groups in this analysis - a total of 96,540 since February 2020, the analysis of data from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) finds.

In the first year of the pandemic, Covid-19 infection drove high numbers of excess deaths involving cardiovascular disease - an umbrella term for a range of heart and blood vessel conditions including heart attack and stroke.

But while deaths from Covid-19 have since fallen year-on-year, the number of deaths involving cardiovascular disease have remained high above expected levels [Appendix 1].

We believe that there are now other major factors likely driving the continued increase in excess deaths involving cardiovascular disease, including the severe, ongoing disruption to NHS heart care, and Covid-19 increasing the risk of heart attack and stroke.

We're calling on the UK Government to take charge of the increasingly urgent cardiovascular disease crisis.

'Deeply troubling'

Dr Charmaine Griffiths, our Chief Executive, said: “It is deeply troubling that so many more people with cardiovascular disease have lost their lives over the last three years. My heart goes out to every family who has endured the pain of losing a loved one, all too often in distressing circumstances.

“For years now, it has been clear that we are firmly in the grip of a heart and stroke care emergency. If little changes, we could continue to see a sustained rise in death rates from cardiovascular conditions that undoes decades of scientific progress to reduce the number of people who die of a heart attack or stroke.

“There is no time to waste - Government must take control of this crisis to give heart patients and their loved ones hope of a better and healthier future. It can do this by prioritising NHS heart care, better preventing heart disease and stroke, and powering science to unlock future treatments and cures.”

Latest figures show that the number of people waiting for time-sensitive cardiac care was at a record high of nearly 390,000 at the end of April in England (1).

Average ambulance response times for heart attacks and strokes have consistently been above 30 minutes since the beginning of 2022, and in December 2022 they even breached 90 minutes (2). The target is 18 minutes, though the Government has set a new average target of 30 minutes over 2023/24.

At the same time, there has been significant disruption to the detection and management of conditions that put people at much greater risk of a heart attack or stroke, like high blood pressure (hypertension). NHSE figures show that 2 million fewer people were recorded as having controlled hypertension in 2021 compared to the previous year.

There are also concerns of a potential rise in heart problems linked to Covid-19. A study from January this year found that people with and without pre-existing heart conditions who caught Covid-19 before the vaccine roll-out were 40 per cent more likely to develop cardiovascular disease, and five times more likely to die in the 18 months after infection (3). People who had experienced severe Covid-19 infection were at even higher risk.

The need to go further and faster

While there has been some progress towards addressing the cardiovascular disease crisis, the BHF is pushing for the UK Government to go much further and faster in providing a comprehensive and co-ordinated solution to a complex challenge.

The charity wants to see action on three fronts: the prioritisation of

NHS heart care, renewed focus on preventing the causes of cardiovascular disease, and supercharging cardiovascular research to unlock the groundbreaking treatments and cures of the future.

Dr Sonya Babu-Narayan, our Associate Medical Director at the BHF and Consultant Cardiologist, said: “Covid-19 no longer fully explains the significant numbers of excess deaths involving cardiovascular disease. Other major factors are likely contributing, including the extreme and unrelenting pressure on the NHS over the last few years.

“Long waits for heart care are dangerous - they put someone at increased risk of avoidable hospital admission, disability due to heart failure and premature death. Yet people are struggling to get potentially lifesaving heart treatment when they need it due to a lack of NHS staff and space, despite cardiovascular disease affecting record numbers of people.

“As more and more heart patients wait longer and longer, we need to see a specific and long-term commitment from Government to fast-track improvements in cardiovascular care now and for the future.”

Professor John Greenwood, President of the British Cardiovascular Society (BCS), said: “The high numbers of excess cardiovascular disease (CVD) deaths published today are worrying, but unfortunately not surprising. We know that Covid has caused direct (Covid leading to new CVD), indirect (reduced treatment and prevention of CVD) and long-term effects (CVD and Long Covid).

“The BCS recommends urgent prioritisation of CVD prevention and treatment, as well as an increase in the cardiovascular workforce (primary and secondary care, and multidisciplinary team) to begin tackling the backlog of work and long waiting lists for treatment. Added to this we need a strong public health strategy from government to promote healthy behaviours and prevent heart disease in the first place.”

Today’s analysis comes after last year’s publication of *The Tipping Point*, a report which told of the immense impact of the pandemic’s legacy on heart patients.

We revealed then that there had been over 30,000 excess deaths involving coronary heart disease since the pandemic began, according to OHID data.

OHID now includes the broader disease category of “cardiovascular disease” which reveals for the first time how many excess deaths there have been involving all heart and circulatory conditions since the onset of the pandemic. The data account for an ageing and growing population.

References

1) [Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Data](https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/rtt-)
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[waiting-times/rtt-data-2022-23/#Aug22>](#), NHS England

2) [Ambulance Quality Indicators](#)

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/ambulance-quality-indicators/>>, AmbSYS Time Series, NHS England

3) [Association of COVID-19 with short- and long-term risk of cardiovascular disease and mortality: a prospective cohort in UK Biobank](#) <<https://academic.oup.com/circres/advance-article/doi/10.1093/cvr/cvac195/6987834?login=false>> ,

Cardiovascular Research.

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