

New data show nearly one-quarter of UK COVID-19 deaths were not caused by virus

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New data show that nearly one-quarter of registered COVID-19 deaths in the United Kingdom were not caused by the virus.

Updated numbers from the [U.K. Office for National Statistics](#) show that 23% of registered COVID-19 deaths are people who died “with” the virus but not “from” infection. While the patients may have tested positive for COVID-19 at the time of their death, the virus itself was not the primary cause.

The news comes as COVID-19 deaths in the country have fallen sharply,

with no more than 28 deaths per day recorded in a country that was once registering deaths as high as 60 per day.

The numbers seem to back up a warning last year from Dr. John Lee, a former pathology professor and NHS consultant pathologist, who called into question the way the U.K. was recording COVID-19 deaths.



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"If someone dies of a respiratory infection in the UK, the specific cause of the infection is not usually recorded, unless the illness is a rare 'notifiable disease,'" [Lee wrote](#) in the *Spectator* last year. "We don't really test for flu, or other seasonal infections. If the patient has, say, cancer, motor neurone disease or another serious disease, this will be recorded as the cause of death, even if the final illness was a respiratory infection. This means UK certifications normally under-record deaths due to respiratory infections."

But Lee noted the illnesses listed as "notifiable diseases" were updated to include COVID-19 but not the flu, causing COVID-19 cases to be notified "in a way that it just would not be for flu or most other infections."

"In the current climate, anyone with a positive test for Covid-19 will certainly be known to clinical staff looking after them: if any of these patients dies, staff will have to record the Covid-19 designation on the death certificate — contrary to usual practice for most infections of this kind," Lee said. "There is a big difference between Covid-19 causing death, and Covid-19 being found in someone who died of other causes. Making Covid-19 notifiable might give the appearance of it causing increasing numbers of deaths, whether this is true or not. It might appear far more of a killer than flu, simply because of the way deaths are recorded."

But British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has not indicated the country is ready to lift virus restrictions, arguing that the country's lower numbers are a result of government policy and not the distribution of the coronavirus vaccine.

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"It is very, very important for everybody to understand that the reduction in these numbers – in hospitalisations and in deaths and in infections – has not been achieved by the vaccination programme," Johnson said. "People don't, I think, appreciate that it's the lockdown that has been overwhelmingly important in delivering this improvement in the pandemic and in the figures that we're seeing. So yes of course the vaccination programme has helped, but the bulk of the work in reducing the disease has been done by the lockdown."