

Decline in new US virus deaths may be temporary reprieve

June 18 2020, by Carla K. Johnson and Nicky Forster



In this June 16, 2020, file photo, signs remind patrons to wear masks and other protocols because of the coronavirus pandemic as they stroll through the Disney Springs shopping, dining and entertainment complex in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself. (AP Photo/John Raoux, File)

The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself.

"For now, it's too soon to be reassured that deaths are going down and everything's OK," said Dr. Cyrus Shahpar of Resolve to Save Lives, a nonprofit organization that works to prevent epidemics.

Deaths from COVID-19 across the country are down to about 680 a day, compared with around 960 two weeks ago, according to an Associated Press analysis of data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. The analysis looked at a seven-day rolling average of deaths through Wednesday.

A multitude of reasons are believed to be at play, including the advent of effective treatments and improved efforts at hospitals and nursing homes to prevent infections and save lives.

But already there are warning signs.

For one thing, the number of newly confirmed cases per day has risen from about 21,400 two weeks ago to 23,200, the AP analysis found.

And in Florida, Georgia, Texas and Arizona—states that loosened their stay-at-home restrictions early—daily deaths have been quietly rising since early June, said Ali Mokdad, professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.



In this June 16, 2020, file photo, medical transports and ambulances are parked outside the emergency-room entrance at Banner Desert Medical Center, in Mesa, Ariz. The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin, File)

"These are not numbers. These are human beings," Mokdad said. "We're going to see a rise in deaths in many places in the United States."

The outbreak has killed about 118,000 people in the U.S. and nearly a half-million worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins' count, though the real numbers are believed to be higher. Potential vaccines are in early

stages of testing, and it is unlikely any will be ready before early next year.

Experts note that a rise in deaths could take awhile to show up in the U.S. statistics. Stay-at-home orders imposed in March, combined with the use of face masks and other social-distancing measures, have been bringing down the daily death toll since mid-April, and the U.S. as a whole is still seeing the positive effects, even though people are starting to work, shop and eat out again.



In this June 15, 2020, file photo, Berto Cortez, a CVS pharmacy technician, shows how COVID-19 tests are processed in a testing area set up by CVS at St. Vincent de Paul medical clinic in Phoenix. The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since

late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin, File)

Doctors watching for an uptick in deaths will be on the alert for certain signals to emerge in a specific order, Shahpar said.

First, cellphone data will show people moving around more. Next, doctors will report more flu-like illnesses, and the proportion of people testing positive for the virus will rise. Hospitalizations will then go up and, finally, so will deaths.

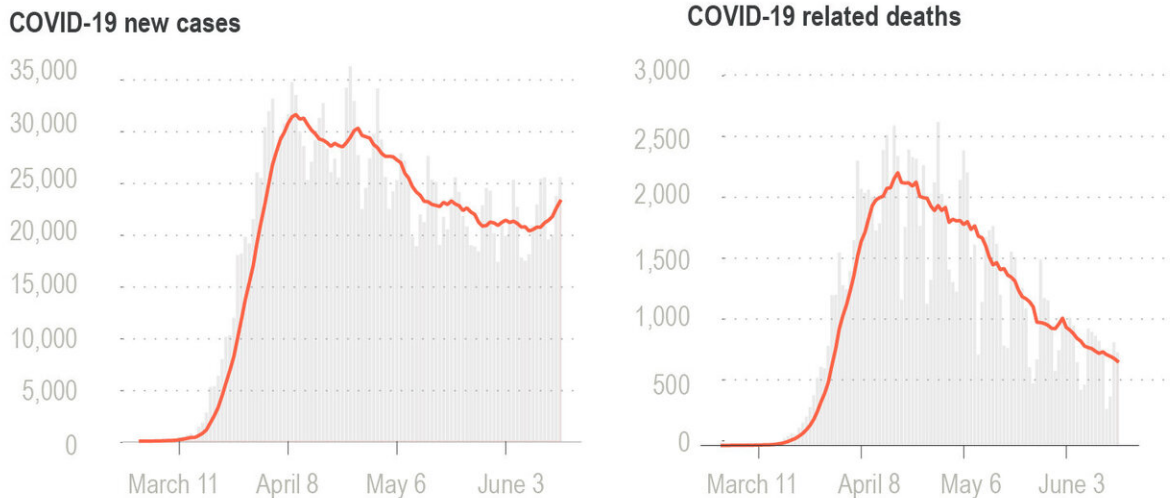
Several factors are believed to be pushing the curves for deaths and cases in opposite directions.

Rising case numbers can partially be explained by the wider availability of testing. Mild cases, previously undetected because of limits on who could be tested, are now showing up in the numbers.

As for the drop in deaths, "it is probably several things happening at once," said Dr. Shmuel Shoham, a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Lessons learned from the "awful early days" are now benefiting the severely sick and people in nursing homes, Shoham said.

As coronavirus cases rise in U.S., daily deaths fall

The U.S. has been experiencing a rise in new COVID-19 cases in recent weeks while the number of daily deaths has dropped. Charts show the seven-day average for both cases and deaths.



Graphic: Nicky Forster Source: Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center



The U.S. overall is experiencing a significant rise in coronavirus-related cases in recent weeks while Covid-19-related fatalities continue to drop. ;

It looks that way in Washington state's King County, where the first nursing home outbreak in the U.S. killed 45 people at the Life Care Center in suburban Seattle. County data shows deaths in similar facilities declining over the past two months. And no single facility in the county has come close to the death toll at Life Care, which was struck unaware.

While it is unclear how much specific treatments may have contributed to the decline in deaths, doctors are trying antivirals such as remdesivir, plasma donated from people who have recovered from the virus and steroids such as dexamethasone, which grabbed attention this week with reports confirming it can save the lives of many of the sickest patients.

While all viruses mutate, scientists say the coronavirus so far is not changing in a way that has made it less deadly.



In this June 16, 2020, file photo, The Standard Baking Company serves customers at their door front in Portland, Maine. The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, File)



In this June 15, 2020, file photo, visitors to the River Walk pass a restaurant that has reopened in San Antonio. The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself. (AP Photo/Eric Gay, File)



In this June 18, 2020, file photo, Jayda Boykin, of Norwood, Mass., a worker at Lewis' Bar and Grille, cleans a table and chairs, in an outdoor dining area on a sidewalk at the restaurant, in Norwood, Mass. The number of deaths per day from the coronavirus in the U.S. has fallen in recent weeks to the lowest level since late March, even as states increasingly reopen for business. But scientists are deeply afraid the trend may be about to reverse itself. (AP Photo/Steven Senne, File)

The decline in deaths this spring might well be tied in part to warmer weather as people spend more time outdoors where circulating air disperses the virus. But that does not bode well for the U.S. come this fall and winter.

Mokdad noted that deaths are on the rise in the Southern Hemisphere,

where it's now winter.

"This virus is going to have a second wave. It's going to follow the pattern of pneumonia," he said. "What we're seeing in the Southern Hemisphere will be happening here."

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