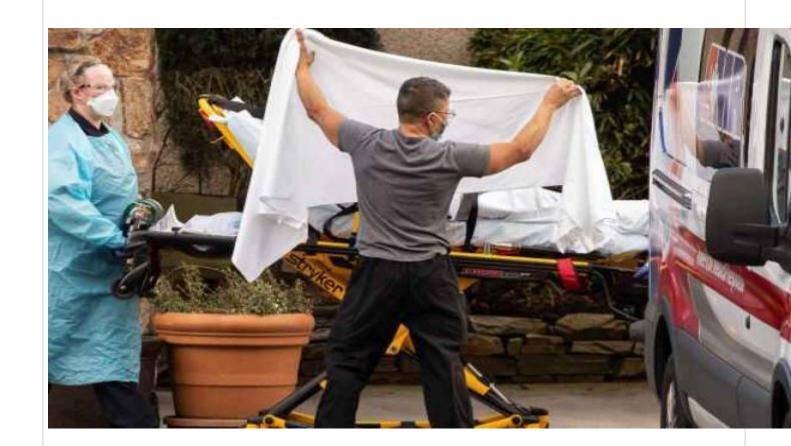# *Study says U.S. COVID-19 deaths could hit 500,000 by February*

Seattle, October 24 (RHC)-- The death toll from COVID-19 in the United States could exceed 500,000 by February unless nearly all Americans wear face masks, researchers said on Friday, as 14 states set new records for one-day increases in cases.

The latest estimate by the widely cited University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) reflects concern that cold winter weather will drive Americans indoors, where the coronavirus spreads more easily, particularly in confined, poorly-ventilated spaces.

Nationwide, 76,195 new cases were reported on Thursday, according to a Reuters analysis, just shy of the single-day record high of 77,299 reported on July 16th. Only India has reported more cases in a single day: 97,894, on September 17th.

"We are heading into a very substantial fall/winter surge," said IHME director Chris Murray, who co-led the research.

The number of possible deaths could drop by 130,000 if 95 percent of Americans covered their faces, the IHME said, echoing a recommendation by Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

The country's Health Secretary Alex Azar has attributed the increase in cases nationwide to individual behaviour, saying household gatherings have become a "major vector of disease spread."

Asked about President Donald Trump's claim that the U.S. was "rounding the turn" on the pandemic during Thursday night's presidential debate, Azar told CNN that Trump was trying to provide hope to Americans waiting for a vaccine.

Pennsylvania, a swing state that is expected to play a crucial role in the November 3 presidential election, reported its largest single-day increase in cases since the pandemic began. "Daily increases are now comparable with what we saw in April 2020," the Pennsylvania Department of Health said in a statement issued on Friday.

Also reporting record one-day increases were the states of Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

On Thursday, there were 916 reported fatalities in the United States, a day after the country recorded over 1,200 new deaths for the first time since August.

Also on Thursday, the number of COVID-19 patients in U.S. hospitals climbed to a two-month high. There are now more than 41,000 people in hospital with coronavirus across the country, up 34 percent since the start of the month, according to a Reuters analysis.

North Dakota, with 887 new cases on both Thursday and Friday, remains the hardest-hit state, based on new cases per capita, followed by South Dakota, Montana and Wisconsin.

Eight states reported record numbers of COVID-19 patients in hospital on Friday: Alaska, Kentucky, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, West Virginia and Wyoming.

In Tennessee, hospitals in Nashville said they had experienced a 40 percent increase in patients admitted for the coronavirus.

Dr Jeff Pothof, an emergency medicine physician at University of Wisconsin Health in Madison, expressed worry about a lack of compliance with public health measures in the state, where some groups have challenged Democratic Governor Tony Evers' COVID-19 restrictions in court.

"If we don't get that and we have such tremendous prevalence of COVID-19 in our communities, I don't see a great way out of this," Dr Pothof said. "The picture isn't rosy."

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