

U.S. diabetes deaths top 100,000 for second straight year

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Type 2 diabetes patient Adedotun Adebayo (15) takes his diabetes medication before eating dinner at his home in Glenarden, Maryland, US, July 15, 2021. (Reuters photo)

New York, February 3 (RHC)-- More than 100,000 Americans died from diabetes in 2021, marking the second consecutive year for that grim milestone and spurring a call for a federal mobilization similar to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The new figures come as an expert panel urges Congress to overhaul diabetes care and prevention, including recommendations to move beyond a reliance on medical interventions alone. A report released earlier this month calls for far broader policy changes to stem the diabetes epidemic, such as promoting

consumption of healthier foods, ensuring paid maternal leave from the workplace, levying taxes on sugary drinks and expanding access to affordable housing, among other areas.

In 2019, diabetes was the seventh-leading cause of death in America and claimed more than 87,000 lives, reflecting a long-running failure to address the illness and leaving many more vulnerable when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, creating new hurdles to accessing care.

Since then, the nation's toll from diabetes has increased sharply, surpassing 100,000 deaths in each of the last two years and representing a new record-high level, according to a Reuters analysis of provisional death data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Diabetes-related deaths surged 17% in 2020 and 15% in 2021 compared to the prepandemic level in 2019. That excluded deaths directly attributed to COVID-19. The CDC concurred with the Reuters analysis and said additional deaths from 2021 are still being tallied.

"The large number of diabetes deaths for a second year in a row is certainly a cause for alarm," said Dr. Paul Hsu, an epidemiologist at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health. "Type 2 diabetes itself is relatively preventable, so it's even more tragic that so many deaths are occurring."

In a new report, the National Clinical Care Commission created by Congress said that the United States must adopt a more comprehensive approach to prevent more people from developing type 2 diabetes, the most common form, and to help people who are already diagnosed avoid life-threatening complications. About 37 million Americans, or 11% of the population, have diabetes, and one in three Americans will develop the chronic disease in their lifetime if current trends persist, according to the commission.

"Diabetes in the U.S. cannot simply be viewed as a medical or health care problem, but also must be addressed as a societal problem that cuts across many sectors, including food, housing, commerce, transportation and the environment," the commission wrote in its Jan. 5 report to Congress and the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The federal panel recommended Congress create an Office of National Diabetes Policy that would coordinate efforts across the government and oversee changes outside health policy. It would be separate from HHS and could be similar to the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, according to Dr. William Herman, commission chairman and a professor of internal medicine and epidemiology at the University of Michigan.

"We aren't going to cure the problem of diabetes in the United States with medical interventions," Herman told Reuters. "The idea is to pull something together across federal agencies, so they are systematically talking to one another."

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