

Stroke Death Disparities Increased During Pandemic

The longstanding racial gap in stroke death rates between Black and white Americans widened significantly.

April 25, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study found that the longstanding racial gap in stroke death rates in the United States widened during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

In 2020 and 2021, Black and white adults experienced increased rates of [stroke](#) death, according to the [CDC study](#). The difference between these two groups increased by about 22% when compared with the five years prior to the pandemic, according to [The Associated Press \(AP\)](#).

“Any health inequity that existed before seems to have been made larger during the pandemic,” Bart Demaerschalk, MD, a stroke researcher at the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix who was not involved in the study, told the AP. “This is another example of that.”

For decades, the rate of stroke deaths has been consistently higher among Black Americans compared with their white counterparts, [according to the AP](#). Until about 10 years ago, stroke deaths in the United States were decreasing overall thanks to improved treatment and lower rates of smoking.

In 2013, the overall rate of stroke death plateaued at about 70 per 100,000 adults 35 and older. In 2021, this rate increased to nearly 77.

The CDC study found that in 2021, the Black stroke death rate for Americans 35 and older increased from about 101 per 100,000 prior to the pandemic to about 113. For white people, the rate increased from about 70 per 100,000 to 75. The difference between these two groups increased from 31 to 38—a 22% increase.

While doctors say COVID infection can increase one’s risk for stroke, that primarily occurs in more severe cases and tends to be worse in people with preexisting health conditions, such as partially blocked blood vessels.

In a [study published last year](#), Demaerschalk and his team found that patients with a history of smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol generally had the highest stroke risk.

Demaerschalk told the AP, however, that in addition to COVID, contributing factors include increased cases of obesity, people seeing their doctors less often or people being reluctant to go to a hospital even if they were experiencing symptoms of stroke because of fear during the early days of the pandemic.

When it comes to treating stroke, “time is absolutely of the essence,” Demaerschalk said.

To learn more, click [#Stroke](#) or [#Health Equity](#) to find headlines such as “Black People Live Longer in Counties With More Black Doctors,” “[Cardiovascular Risk Among Young People With Type 1 Diabetes](#)” and “[Black and Latino People Have Higher Risk for Death After Certain Strokes](#).”

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