People With Developmental Disabilities More Likely To Die From COVID-19

by Shaun Heasley | June 8, 2020

A new study is offering some of the first details about how the coronavirus is impacting people with developmental disabilities and the picture is not pretty.

Individuals in this population are significantly more likely than others to die if they contract COVID-19, according to findings published in the Disability and Health Journal in late May.

The study looked at electronic medical records for 30,282 people with the virus, including 474 with developmental disabilities like intellectual disability, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome.

Among those ages 18 to 74 with COVID-19, researchers found that the fatality rate was 4.5 percent for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities compared to 2.7 percent for others. The rate of death was also higher among individuals with developmental disabilities ages 17 and under, while the fatality rate was similar for those ages 75 and older whether or not they had a disability.

“Based upon the case fatality rates we report among those ages 18-74, if 100,000 individuals with IDD contract COVID-19 — which is entirely possible in light of the estimates of the size of this population and the cumulative incidence rates we are seeing in our research — we would expect 4,500 to die,” said Scott Landes, an associate professor of sociology at Syracuse University who worked on the study. “Comparatively, among 100,000 individuals without IDD, we would expect 2,700 to die. That would be an excess of 1,800 IDD deaths and in my mind that is unacceptable.”

It’s not entirely clear from the data why individuals with developmental disabilities experience a higher risk of death from the virus, though the findings indicate that this group did have more co-occurring conditions including hypertension, heart disease, respiratory disease and diabetes. The researchers also noted that people with developmental disabilities are more likely to live in congregate settings where it’s harder to limit the spread of COVID-19.

“More attention is needed to this vulnerable health population in order to ensure their safety and well-being during this pandemic, including careful attention to the impact of public policies such as PPE prioritization and funding streams on the ability of residential service providers to guarantee quality care during this time,” Landes said.