



ACCESS TO CARE DURING COVID-19

In 2020, the foremost public health issue around the world is undoubtedly the spread of the virus that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19). COVID-19 has rightfully risen to the top of the health priorities for our community, but central Oklahoma continues to face numerous other health challenges.

This research brief examines central Oklahoma's pre-pandemic health challenges, highlighting early evidence of the pandemic's impact on mental health and access to care.

Oklahoma's Health Status Prior to COVID-19

High prevalence of chronic disease and access to care challenges drive poor overall health in Oklahoma. Compared to other states, Oklahoma ranked 46th nationally

in 2019 for health outcomes for seniors, even before the COVID-19 public health crisis.¹

High-Risk Underlying Conditions for Severe Illness from COVID-19

Early estimates indicate that many central Oklahomans are suffering from pre-existing conditions known to increase the severity of COVID-19-related illness, including:

- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)
- Cardiovascular Disease
- Diabetes
- Chronic Kidney Disease
- Obesity

Prior to COVID-19, these five risk factors heavily impacted the health of our population. Among seniors, Alzheimer's disease is also a significant contributor to death.

PREVALENCE ESTIMATES OF UNDERLYING HIGH-RISK CONDITIONS²

40.5% CANADIAN COUNTY

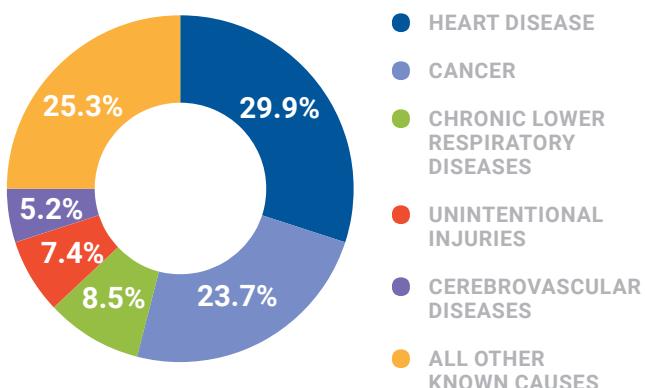
43.5% LOGAN COUNTY

45.2% OKLAHOMA COUNTY

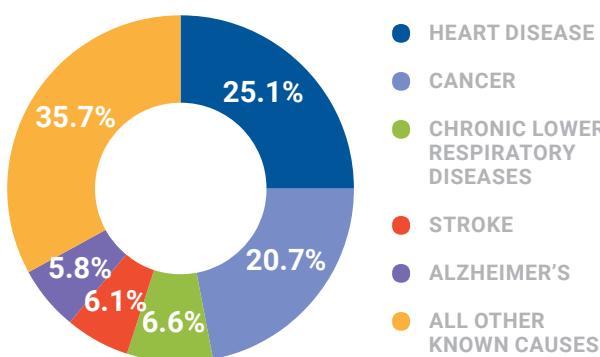
40.7% NATIONAL MEDIAN

LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH IN OKLAHOMA³

Leading Causes of Death in Oklahoma - 2018



Leading Causes of Death in Oklahoma - Age 65 and Older



UNITED WAY PARTNER AGENCY SPOTLIGHT



Variety Care is a nonprofit community health center that provides affordable, accessible health care for uninsured, underinsured and low income Oklahomans. A nonprofit partner agency of United Way, Variety Care provides for the spectrum of health needs for all ages without cost barriers.

Q: Earlier in 2020, many clinics took precautions in scheduling visits and reducing numbers of patients due to COVID-19. How did the pandemic impact Variety Care?

A: In March and April, Variety Care served approximately 550 patients per day, a 45% reduction in patient volume from prior to the pandemic. In September, we averaged 900 patients per day. Our patient volume was trending about 13% higher before the pandemic, so normally we would have anticipated an average of 1,120 patients per day in September.

Q: From a medical perspective, what is typically meant by "routine" care? Are there any health risks to patients when there are delays or trouble in accessing these services?

A: Routine care includes well-child checks, mammograms, colon cancer screening, cervical cancer screening and monitoring chronic care conditions like diabetes, heart disease, COPD and Alzheimer's. Delaying health care visits to monitor chronic conditions can be life threatening.

Q: What are the top concerns of the Variety Care medical team related to the impact of COVID-19 on routine care?

A: Delayed or missed immunizations among children and aging adults could lead to increased risks of vaccine-preventable diseases. Lack of preventive care such as cancer screening can lead to higher rates of cancers found in later stages of the disease. Patients with existing health conditions who are unable to maintain continuity of care for disease and medication management are at higher risk for negative consequences.

MENTAL HEALTH IN CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

Mental Health Prior to COVID-19

Recent statistics collected prior to COVID-19 show the significant burden of mental health challenges in Oklahoma.

- 1 in 12 Oklahoma adults met criteria for a substance use disorder in 2018.⁴
- More than 30 central Oklahomans over age 65 died by suicide annually since 2014.⁵
 - On average, 35 central Oklahomans over age 60 die by suicide each year.
- Life expectancy for Oklahoma adults with serious mental illness can be 10 years less than the general population.⁶
- The number of Department of Mental Health patients over age 65 increased by 95% from 2011 to 2020, which is about four times the overall growth rate.⁷

Potential for Worsening Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When considering COVID-19 disruptions to normal life, mental health professionals caution that increased stress levels caused by social disconnection should be considered. Social distancing, quarantines and shutdowns of social activity to slow the spread of the virus can potentially increase trauma and anxiety across the population.⁸ In addition, the massive mobilization of essential workers required to respond to COVID-19 has weighed heavily on their stress levels.

Contributors to Adverse Mental Health During the Pandemic

SOCIAL DISTANCING⁹

CHALLENGE: Isolation from friends and family; struggle in adapting to "a new normal"

SOLUTIONS: Harness digital tools for social connection

QUARANTINE¹⁰

CHALLENGE: Stigmatization and fear for personal health and loved ones

SOLUTIONS: Accurate and informative communication

ESSENTIAL WORKER BURNOUT¹¹

CHALLENGE: High stress levels and potential for traumatic experiences

SOLUTIONS: Employer support and trauma awareness

Loneliness

Loneliness is defined as the unpleasant emotional condition when one perceives they are isolated. Even though an individual may seem to have social connections such as friends and co-workers, their feelings of being alone may persist. Most people occasionally deal with loneliness. Researchers use scales such as the UCLA Loneliness Questionnaire to distinguish when loneliness becomes a risk to overall wellness. Several social factors can drive loneliness, including perceived quality of relationships and infrequent meaningful interactions with other people.¹²

Facts About Loneliness¹³

- Loneliness has a profound impact on health. Evidence points to a detrimental influence as strong as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

- Prior to COVID-19, nearly half of Americans (47%) report sometimes or always feeling alone.
- 2 in 5 (43%) Americans report they rarely feel close to others or have people they can talk to.

Reduced Access to Care in the Pandemic

Health professionals moved rapidly to ramp up resources for COVID-19 care, while limiting chances for inadvertent viral spread by reducing nonemergency medical care. For older patients especially, the fear of contracting COVID-19 caused a tremendous amount of uncertainty and caution.

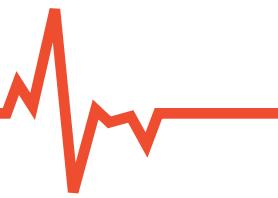
- About 4 in 10 Americans (42%) avoided medical care out of concern for contracting COVID-19 in early 2020.¹⁴
- 31% of Americans delayed routine care.
- 12% of Americans delayed urgent or emergency care.
- 9 out of 10 dental practices in Oklahoma closed temporarily from March to May 2020.¹⁵ As of September 2020, 4 out of 10 are open but are seeing fewer patients.

Sustaining Access to Care

Given the significant health issues among Oklahomans, delayed access to care can halt progress on treating the non-COVID-19 health challenges in the community. In the latter part of 2020, visits to medical professionals began to recover from the sharp initial declines in the early weeks of the pandemic. Treatment for health conditions is also evolving to rely more on telehealth to connect patients with their providers.

Interested in printed copies of our research publications or a presentation?

Contact United Way of Central Oklahoma's Community Impact Department at
research@unitedwayokc.org or 405-236-8441



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An enduring community analysis of the health and human service needs in central Oklahoma

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