

The Guardian

Excess winter deaths in England and Wales highest since 1976

Call for more NHS resources as elderly people and women among most vulnerable

Denis Campbell *Health policy editor*

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Snow in Derbyshire last December. The temperatures last winter are thought to have been partly to blame for the excess deaths. Photograph: Joe Giddens/PA

There were 50,100 excess deaths in England and Wales last winter, when there was a prolonged spell of extreme cold, making it the highest number since 1976, figures have shown.

The Office for National Statistics said flu and the ineffectiveness of the flu vaccine were key reasons for the rise of excess winter deaths in 2017-18.

The deaths occurred during the NHS's most serious "winter crisis" for many years. A lack of staff and beds meant all types of health services, particularly hospitals, were unable to cope with both the number of patients needing treatment and the severity of many of their conditions.

Women and people aged over 85 were among those most likely to die last winter, although the rate of winter deaths among males aged up to 64 doubled in just a year, the ONS found. A third of the deaths were due to serious breathing difficulties, including flu, asthma and bronchitis.

The 50,100 excess deaths were about 15,000 (45.1%) more than those that occurred in 2016-17 and double the total in 2015-16.

Nick Stripe, a specialist in health analysis and life events at the ONS, said: “It is likely that last winter’s increase was due to the predominant strain of flu, the effectiveness of the influenza vaccine and below-average winter temperatures.”

Doctors and groups representing older people said too little was being done to keep older people warm and safe, and to give the NHS the resources it needs.

Caroline Abrahams, Age UK’s charity director, said: “A toxic cocktail of poor housing, high energy prices and ill-health can make winter a dangerous time for many older people, and tragically it is the oldest and those who are the most vulnerable who particularly suffer the consequences.

“Last winter, there were nearly 46,000 excess winter deaths among people aged 65 and over - a shocking 92% of all excess deaths - equating to 379 older people a day. These distressing figures are now the highest we’ve seen in over 40 years.”

Dr Nick Scriven, the president of the Society for Acute Medicine, said the figures raised concerns about the persistent winter problems being encountered across the NHS every year.

The NHS was operating year-round under such pressure that it was in a state of “eternal winter”, he said. As a result, “by the time winter actually hits, it leaves hospitals struggling to cope, having been maxed out all year round”.

He said the NHS was not well-equipped to deal with its many challenges, which included “an older, frailer population with increasingly complex medical problems, a lack of funding across health and social care to meet demand, a recruitment crisis and persistently poor performance.

“Ultimately, despite reassurances from the government and NHS leaders that enough funding has been made available and the service is coping with the additional demands placed on it, the reality is clearly different given these statistics.”

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