

Death Rates

Higher than Expected



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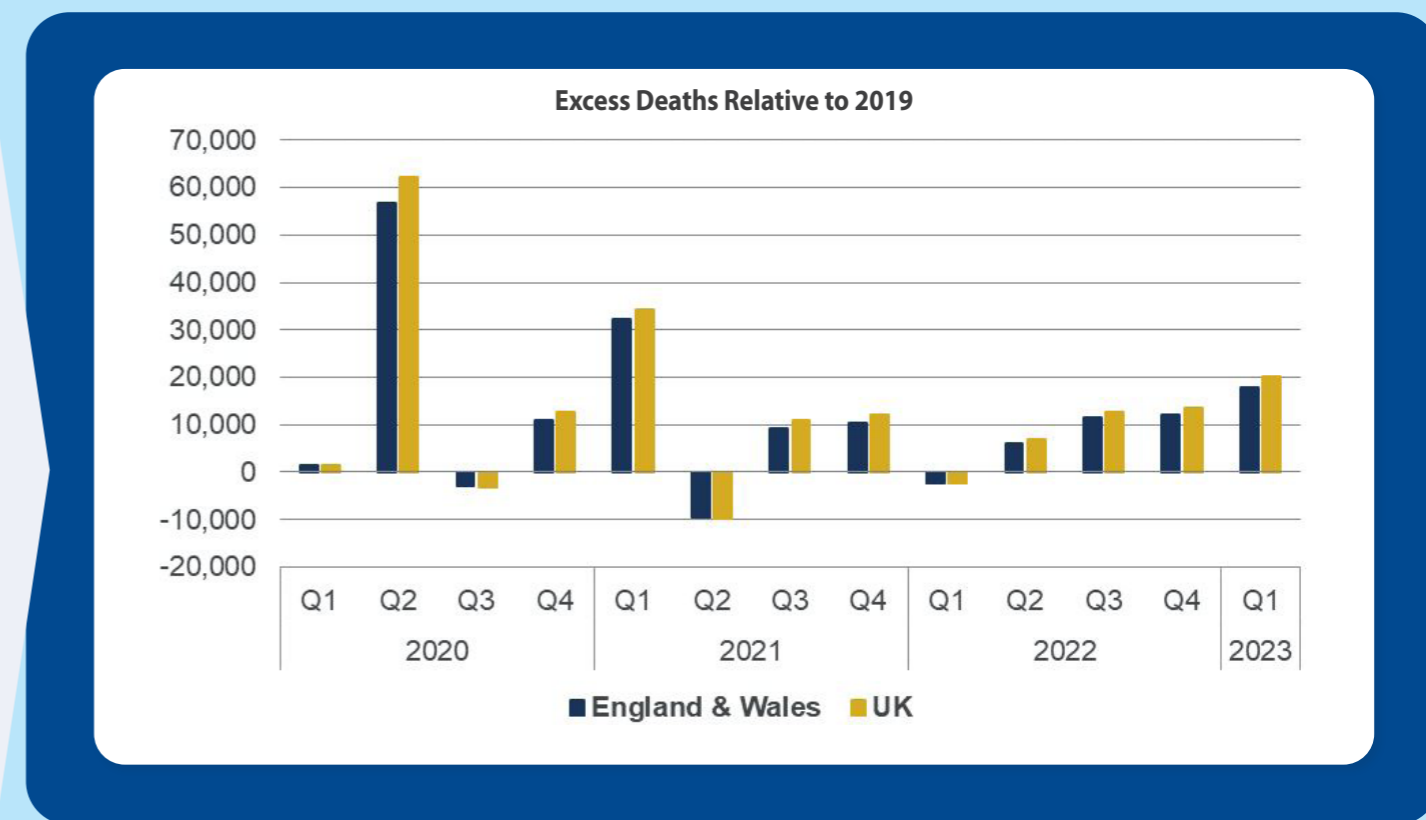
Covid news still features prominently in the headlines on a regular basis, despite it being more than three years since the first Covid lockdown was announced.

The Continuous Mortality Investigation (“CMI”) analyses the death data in England and Wales published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and issues a detailed report on a quarterly basis. The latest CMI mortality bulletin, which looks at the first quarter of 2023, indicates that there are some concerning trends emerging.

Excess deaths

Since the start of the pandemic there has been considerable focus on the numbers of “excess deaths”. This is a measure of the difference between the actual number of deaths over a period, relative to those expected if mortality rates had been the same as in the corresponding period of 2019 – the last “normal” pre-pandemic year.

The chart shows the number of “excess deaths” in each quarter since the beginning of 2020. This clearly illustrates that the greatest number of excess deaths occurred during the second quarter of 2020. This was then followed by fewer than expected deaths in the third quarter of 2020, before rising sharply again during the peak of the second wave in early 2021. The data for more recent quarters show a gradual increase in excess deaths.



Source: CMI

What’s happening?

Looking at the first two years of the pandemic, each of the two quarters with the greatest numbers of excess deaths were immediately followed by a quarter where there were fewer deaths than expected. At the time, this was interpreted that at least some of the excess deaths would have been expected to have occurred within a few months anyway, so perhaps the number of excess deaths would even out over time to some extent.

The results for the first quarter of 2022 indicated that things were perhaps returning to more “normal” pre-pandemic levels. However, there now appears to be a more worrying trend emerging from the second quarter of 2022 onwards, as deaths have been higher than expected in all of the last four quarters, particularly the most recent one.

Possible reasons

The underlying reasons for these excess deaths are likely to be complex, but the CMI report states that Covid 19 was mentioned on the death certificates of 8,600 deaths in the first quarter of 2023 - this is equivalent to approximately 40% of the excess deaths. However, Covid does not explain the other 60% of the excess deaths, which are attributed to other causes. In reality these additional deaths are likely to be due to a combination of factors, including delayed diagnosis and treatment during lockdown, increasingly long waiting lists for medical treatment and the longer-term effects of Covid19.

The table summarises the excess deaths in each year since the start of the pandemic. It is notable that the excess deaths so far in 2023 are already 65% of the excess deaths seen during the whole of 2022. It will be interesting to see if this trend continues over the next few months.

Year	Excess deaths
2020	72,900
2021	47,500
2022	31,000
2023 (1st quarter only)	20,200
Total	171,600

