



Press release

Statistics Netherlands

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2,000 more deaths than usual in January

Just over 2,000 more people died in January this year than in a normal January, according to figures from Statistics Netherlands. The extra deaths were nearly all elderly people. The peak was probably caused by the flu epidemic which lasted from mid-December to mid-January.

Peak at the beginning of January

Fifteen thousand people died in the Netherlands in January, an average of 484 per day. This is 68 more than the daily average in an ordinary January.

Mortality started to increase just after Christmas and reached its peak on 6 January, when, according to Statistics Netherlands' figures, 564 people died: 30% more than on a normal January day (416). January 2000 had ten days on which more than 500 people died. The daily death rate was back to normal by the beginning of February.

Flu epidemic probably pushed up death rate

The high number of deaths was very probably connected with the flu epidemic which lasted from mid-December to mid-January. The number of people consulting their GP with flu symptoms was highest in the first two weeks of the year, with 32 cases reported per 10,000 inhabitants.

Most flu victims among the elderly

The surplus mortality consisted mainly of elderly people. There were 50% more deaths than in a usual January among the over nineties, while mortality among the 80-89 year-olds was 33% higher. The number of deaths up to age 40 was normal for the time of year.

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Ageing population: higher peaks?

The number of older people in the population is increasing: at the moment there are 2.3 million people aged 60-79 in the Netherlands, in 2020 there will probably be 3.5 million. The number of over eighties will increase from just under half a million today, to an expected 700 thousand in 2020. Flu epidemics or periods of extreme cold or heat may lead to higher mortality peaks in the future, although this is not only connected with the number of elderly people. New insights into the still largely unknown relationship between outside temperature and mortality, and the success rates of vaccination programmes will also affect monthly mortality patterns.

Previous mortality peaks

Peaks in the number of deaths are more common in winter months, and nearly always coincide with flu epidemics, sometimes in combination with a period of cold. In the winter of 1998/1999 just over 2,000 people more died than the populations forecasts foresaw on the basis of the normal seasonal pattern. In the cold winter of 1995/1996 just over 4,000 more people than usual died.

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