Changing the criteria used to identify deaths caused by COVID-19

The Department of Health collects, maintains, and releases data about deaths in Washington.

Why are you changing the way you identify deaths?
Until now, we counted all people who died that tested positive for COVID-19. This method identifies people who had the virus, but fails to tell us whether COVID-19 caused their death.

Why did you report deaths of all people who tested positive for COVID-19?
Our goal from the beginning of the outbreak was to get data out in near real-time so that health care providers, policy makers, and public health professionals had access to the most current information. Our normal process for releasing final death data is complex, involves multiple data systems, and can take up to 18 months from start to finish.

How are you changing the way you identify deaths caused by COVID-19?
At present, we count all deaths to anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19. We will change the way we report COVID-19 deaths in two phases.

Phase 1 will take place on June 17, and Phase 2 will roll out over the next few weeks.

Phase 1: Remove deaths where COVID-19 did not contribute to death from our death count. For Phase 1, this will result in seven deaths being removed from our current death count, including two suicides, three homicides, and two overdose deaths. Four of the deaths are from King and three are from Yakima. Additional non-COVID-19 deaths may be removed throughout the course of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Phase 2: Expand how we report deaths to identify whether we can confirm or rule-out COVID-19 as a contributing cause of death, including identifying probable and suspected deaths. As part of Phase two, future COVID-19 death classifications will include whether:

1. COVID-19 contributed to the death (death certificate, testing, and other case information available to confirm);
2. COVID-19 probably contributed to the death (death certificate information available but testing information not available);
3. COVID-19 is suspected to have contributed to death (follow-up being conducted prior to ruling out or confirming death);
4. COVID-19 did not contribute to the death (examples include homicide, overdose, suicide, car accident, or disease with clear exclusion of COVID-19 illness).

Will this change the number of deaths reported so far?
Yes. On June 17 we removed seven deaths from our case count. Of those, two were suicides, three were homicides, and two were overdoses. Four were from King County and three were
from Yakima County. Both counties already deleted those deaths from their case counts. When we implement Phase 2, death numbers will change again as some deaths are added to the count and others are removed.

**How will these changes benefit the public?**
These changes will help us deliver an even more accurate count of COVID-19 deaths, and add the context of reporting cases as Confirmed, Probable, Suspect, and not COVID-19.

**Next Steps?**
In a few weeks, we will begin reporting deaths in categories such as Confirmed, Probable, Suspect, and not COVID-19. This will provide an even more accurate case count. We will continue to review these processes to ensure we are provide the most accurate, current information possible as we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Where can I get more information?**
Learn more about the statewide response to COVID-19 at [coronavirus.wa.gov](http://coronavirus.wa.gov).