

NDERF Fact Sheet

How common are NDEs—how many people have them?

Prepared for public education and research literacy (NDERF.org)

Why NDE prevalence is a vitally important topic

People commonly ask, “How many people have had a near-death experience (NDE)?” A scientifically responsible answer requires distinguishing between (1) estimates in the general population (lifetime prevalence) and (2) estimates among survivors of specific medical crises such as cardiac arrest. Prevalence estimates also depend on whether NDEs are identified by self-report alone or by standardized instruments such as the Greyson Near-Death Experience Scale (NDE Scale). [3,4,6]

Even with these methodological differences, multiple studies converge on the conclusion that NDEs are not rare. Community surveys typically suggest a single-digit percentage of the general population report an NDE, and prospective clinical studies in resuscitated cardiac arrest survivors often report rates around 10–20%. [2–5]

At-a-glance summary

General population (lifetime prevalence): A reasonable evidence-based summary is that approximately 4%–10% of people report having had an NDE, depending on definition, sampling, and measurement. [2–4]

Cardiac arrest survivors (clinical studies): Prospective studies often report that roughly 10%–20% of resuscitated cardiac arrest survivors report experiences consistent with NDEs (rates vary by study design and criteria). [5]

United States (order-of-magnitude): Applying a 4%–10% prevalence range to an estimated U.S. adult population of 247,085,274 suggests approximately 10–25 million U.S. adults may report an NDE. [7]

1. What “how common” means in NDE research

In NDE research, “how common” is typically reported as prevalence: the proportion of a defined group who report an NDE. Two prevalence questions are most common:

- Lifetime prevalence in the general population: “Have you ever had an NDE?” This estimate is influenced by sampling (representative vs convenience samples) and by question wording. [2–4,6]

- Event-based prevalence in a clinical group: for example, among survivors of cardiac arrest who are interviewed after resuscitation. This estimate depends on the medical context, timing of interviews, and measurement tools. [5]

2. What general population surveys suggest

General population surveys provide the best evidence for how many people have had an NDE at any point in life. These studies commonly report single-digit percentages.

Examples include:

- Germany (survey of >2,000 persons): approximately 4% reported NDEs. [2]
- International sample (35 countries; validated with the Greyson scale): 10% met Greyson NDE Scale criteria (≥ 7), with 95% confidence interval 8.5–12%. [3]
- Measurement-focused scholarship summarizes national-sample surveys as commonly finding approximately 4%–8% reporting NDEs, with differences depending on methods. [4]

3. What prospective hospital-based studies suggest

Prospective clinical studies interview patients after resuscitation or recovery from severe medical crises. In resuscitated cardiac arrest survivors, reported NDE prevalence is often around 10–20%, though study methods differ. [5]

- van Lommel et al. (prospective, 344 cardiac arrest patients): 18% reported an NDE; 12% reported what the authors described as a “core” experience. [5]

4. Translating prevalence into “how many people”

Percentages can be translated into approximate numbers. For example, if the U.S. adult population is 247,085,274: [7]

- 4% of U.S. adults \approx 9,883,411 people
- 5% of U.S. adults \approx 12,354,264 people
- 10% of U.S. adults \approx 24,708,527 people

These should be understood as order-of-magnitude estimates. The best estimate depends on whether the prevalence study is representative, how the question is asked, and whether a standardized scale is used. [3,4,6]

5. Why prevalence estimates vary across studies

Differences in NDE prevalence estimates usually reflect methodological factors, including:

- Definition and measurement: Some studies count self-identified NDEs; others require a validated scale cutoff (e.g., NDE Scale ≥ 7). [3,4]
- Sampling: Representative surveys can differ from convenience or online samples. [3,6]
- Question wording: Small wording differences can change how respondents classify unusual experiences. [6]

- Disclosure effects: Some experiencers hesitate to report NDEs because of fear of dismissal, stigma, or misunderstanding. [4]

6. Bottom line

Across the best available evidence, NDEs appear to be relatively common. A reasonable summary is that approximately 4%–10% of the general population report having had an NDE at some point in life, translating to many millions of people in the United States, and many tens of millions worldwide. [2–4,7]

References (with links)

[1] Near Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF). “How Many USA NDEs.”

https://www.nderf.org/NDERF/Research/number_nde_usa.htm

[2] Knoblauch H, Schmied I, Schnettler B. Different kinds of near-death experience: A report on a survey of near-death experiences in Germany. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. 2001;20(1):15–29.

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[3] Kondziella D, Dreier JP, Olsen MH, et al. Prevalence of near-death experiences in people with and without REM sleep intrusion. *PeerJ*. 2019;7:e7585.

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[5] van Lommel P, van Wees R, Meyers V, Elfferich I. Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest: a prospective study in the Netherlands. *The Lancet*. 2001;358(9298):2039–2045.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11755611/>

[6] Sabom M. Book Review: *Adventures in Immortality* (Gallup/Proctor). *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. 1983;2(2):160–163. (Discusses the commonly cited ~5% U.S. estimate and methodological considerations.)

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[7] Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center (source: U.S. Census). Adult population (ages 18+)—United States.

<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/6538-adult-population-by-age-group>