

How Deadly is the H1N1 Virus?

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

In-depth Report: [THE H1N1 SWINE FLU PANDEMIC](#)

Yesterday, the World Health Organization [warned](#) that “all of humanity is under threat”. That sounds extremely dire, indeed.

However, the science says something different.

For example, as the Los Angeles times [notes](#) today:

Scientists studying the virus are coming to the consensus that this hybrid strain of influenza — at least in its current form — isn't shaping up to be as fatal as the strains that caused some previous pandemics.

In fact, the current outbreak of the H1N1 virus, which emerged in San Diego and southern Mexico late last month, may not even do as much damage as the run-of-the-mill flu outbreaks that occur each winter without much fanfare.

The LA Times goes on to provide useful detail:

Mounting preliminary evidence from genetics labs, epidemiology models and simple mathematics suggests that the worst-case scenarios are likely to be avoided in the current outbreak.

“This virus doesn't have anywhere near the capacity to kill like the 1918 virus,” which claimed an estimated 50 million victims worldwide, said Richard Webby, a leading influenza virologist at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn...

“There are certain characteristics, molecular signatures, which this virus lacks,” said Peter Palese, a microbiologist and influenza expert at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York. In particular, the swine flu lacks an amino acid that appears to increase the number of virus particles in the lungs and make the disease more deadly...

We expect to see more cases, more hospitalizations, and, unfortunately, we are likely to see more deaths from the outbreak,” Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told reporters Wednesday on her first day at work.

But certainly nothing that would dwarf a typical flu season. In the U.S., between 5% and 20% of the population becomes ill and 36,000 people die — a mortality rate of between 0.24% and 0.96%...

And a pandemic doesn't necessarily have a high fatality rate...

Though scientists have begun to relax about the initial toll, they're considerably less comfortable when taking into account the fall flu season.

They remain haunted by the experience of 1918, when the relatively mild first wave of flu was followed several months later by a more aggressive wave.

The longer the virus survives, the more chances it has to mutate into a deadlier form.

"If this virus keep going through our summer," Palese said, "I would be very concerned."

The bottom line is that while this flu is certainly spreading worldwide, and while it could mutate into something extremely lethal, right now it is fairly mild.

Note: Precautions, such as frequent hand-washing, should certainly be undertaken. And studies note that [Vitamin D can help ward off flus or reduce their severity](#).

Source: <http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2009/04/swine-flu-could-be-less-deadly-than.html>

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