

The New Coronavirus Outbreak, COVID-19, Sounds Menacing and Is

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There is no room for complacency or outright fear. The new coronavirus outbreak, COVID-19, sounds menacing and is. But there's another viral epidemic hitting countries around the world: the flu.

COVID-19 has, since December, led to more than 75,000 illnesses and 2,000 deaths, primarily in mainland China. But, statistically the flu is more menacing. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta says that in the United States alone, the flu caused an estimated 26 million illnesses, 250,000 hospitalizations and 14,000 deaths this season.

But seasonal flu is expected, it is known about. It is a clear and present danger. COVID-19 is new and the fear it is spreading is more reminiscent of a plague.

We are aware of flu symptoms, a high temperature, a cough, sore throat, aching muscle, splitting headaches, fatigue and, sometimes, vomiting and diarrhea. COVID-19 symptoms, from what we can tell, are primarily fever, cough and shortness of breath.

The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Protection, analyzed 44,672 confirmed cases in China between December 31, and February 11. Of those cases, 80.9 percent were considered mild, 13.8 percent severe and 4.7 percent critical.

These figures must be treated with caution, according to the World Health Organization as various respiratory viruses have similar symptoms.

The death rate from COVID-19 is believed to be around 2.3 percent in mainland China. Seasonal flu has a death rate of less than 0.1 percent — but still manages to kill up to 650,000 people globally every year.

COVID-19 fatalities vary by location and this seems to be a key factor. In Hubei Province, the epicenter of the outbreak, the death rate reached 2.9 percent but, crucially, in other provinces of China, that rate was just 0.4 percent. In addition, older adults have been hit the hardest. The death rate soars to nearly 15 percent in those 80 and older and for those in the 70-79 bracket it is about 8 percent. It falls to 3.6 percent for 60-69 age group and 1.3 percent for 50 to 59. It is less than half a percent for the 40-49 age group and just 0.2 percent for people aged 10 to 39. Nobody 9 or under has died of this virus to date.

The “basic reproduction number,” gauges how many people on average would be infected

by one person. For the flu it is about 1.3. For COVID-19, indicators suggest it is about 2.2 people.

Unlike seasonal flu, for which there is a vaccine to protect against infection, there is no vaccine for COVID-19.

In Beijing, a city of 21 million people about 1,000 km from Wuhan where the outbreak originated, there have been about 400 confirmed cases. People must wear face masks in public. Most shops are shut. Schools and colleges are closed. Students are taking their courses and doing assignments at home, online. There are temperature checks for those entering supermarkets, the subway and office buildings. In housing compounds, residents are given special passes. Without them, you cannot enter. Some residential compounds allow people to visit friends and relatives after they submit their contact details to security guards.

There is also a political contagion. March is the month of the “two sessions”, when the parliament and advisory body meet in Beijing. It is the highlight of the political year. It has been cancelled.

Trade disputes? Check. Riots in Hong Kong? Check. Pork-price spike? Check. All politically manageable. COVID-19? The moment the virus hit the body politic was the death on February 7, of 33-year-old ophthalmologist Li Wenliang. On December 30 he sent a chat-group message to fellow doctors warning them to wear protective clothing to avoid infection. He had noticed seven cases of a virus that he thought looked like *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome* - the virus that also originated in China and led to a global epidemic in 2003.

Just days later the Public Security Bureau demanded he sign a self-confession where he “admitted” making “false comments” that had “severely disturbed the social order”.

He was one of eight people who police said were being investigated for “spreading rumours”. Local authorities later apologized to Li.

On January 10 he started coughing. The next day he had a fever and two days later he was in hospital. He was diagnosed with the coronavirus on January 30.

It is still possible that president Xi Jinping will emerge largely unscathed, as provincial authorities take the blame and are held accountable for the crisis. Containing the outbreak has paralyzed much of the economy but Xi could argue that Chinese society ultimately benefited from tighter control and surveillance. But if the virus cannot be contained quickly the public’s reaction is hard to gauge.

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