

Why It's Too Early to Compare COVID-19 With the Flu

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By Courtney Vinopal

WASHINGTON, D.C.—As novel coronavirus spreads around the world, some U.S. officials seem to be downplaying the potential global scope and severity of the disease by comparing it to a common illness—influenza.

In a press conference Wednesday, President Donald Trump softened the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, saying that the virus is "a little bit like the flu."

"We'll essentially have a flu shot for this in a fairly quick manner," he said, referring to efforts to develop a vaccine for the disease.

According to experts like Dr. Anthony Fauci, who directs the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, it's still likely to be at least a year before a vaccine is ready for human use.

Trump also noted that far more Americans die from the flu each year than have been infected by the coronavirus thus far.

But experts say comparing COVID-19 to the flu understates what's at stake.

"It's a confusing tone that the president set," said Lawrence Gostin, a professor Georgetown University who also directs the World Health Organization Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law.

He said the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have underscored the seriousness of the virus, but Trump's comments appear "to fluff it off as if it's a common cold."

Nancy Messonnier, director for the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, has warned that transmission of the virus in the U.S. is inevitable, that it is "not so much a question of if, but when."

So far, there are millions of cases of the flu worldwide, compared to about 84,000 novel coronavirus cases, as of Friday [Feb. 28] afternoon. But public health officials warn that there is still a lot they don't know about the new virus, including the various ways it's transmitted, how pathogenic it might be, and how it could alter genetically.

That uncertainty creates an added urgency to containing the virus and, if those efforts fail, preparing for it to infect large swaths of the global population.

Here's what we know now about the way these two infections compare, in terms of transmission, deadliness and scope.

How you get sick

Both the flu and COVID-19 are spread from person to person, transmitted through respiratory droplets that are formed when these people cough, sneeze or talk, according to the CDC. COVID-19 may also be transmitted when people touch surfaces that are infected, but this has not yet been confirmed.

"We know these viruses can potentially survive on surfaces depending on the number of hours or days," said Dr. Brian Garibaldi, the director of the biocontainment unit at Johns Hopkins Medicine. "We don't know yet if it's more likely that you're going to get [COVID-19] by coming into contact with droplets in the air."

Neither the flu nor COVID-19 can be treated with antibiotics.

Garibaldi added that the one way it may be useful to compare COVID-19 with the flu is when talking about prevention.

"The method you can use to try to protect yourself from the flu is also going to help prevent you from getting the coronavirus," he said.

Practicing good hygiene, by throwing out tissues, covering your cough and washing your hands, will help prevent the spread of both diseases.

Number of deaths

Of the 83,652 COVID-19 cases confirmed thus far, there have been 2,858 deaths, according to the World Health Organization. A total of 2,791 of those deaths were within China.

So far, 15 COVID-19 cases have been reported in the U.S., with zero resulting deaths thus far. Another 47 Americans contracted the disease abroad and have been brought back to the U.S. to be quarantined.

By contrast, the CDC estimates that at least 18,000 people in the U.S. have died from the flu since October, and at least 32 million have been infected.

Globally, the flu kills hundreds of thousands of people annually. A 2017 study published in the *Lancet*, a leading medical journal, estimated that between 291,000 and 646,000 people die from seasonal-related respiratory illnesses each year.

Nevertheless, just because the flu is a more severe threat to Americans than COVID-19 right now doesn't mean that the virus couldn't grow to become just as, or more, deadly in the future. "It's precisely because the flu kills so many people that we should worry about coronavirus. We don't want a mass-circulating virus that kills that many people," Gostin said.

Harvard epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch estimates that between 40 percent and 70 percent of people around the world will be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. Gostin said that these sorts of predictions are "exactly why we need to take it seriously."