

# Coronavirus in America: Keep your panic in check

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(HealthDay)—A deadly virus that's surging through a foreign country

makes its way into the United States, carried into this country by an unwitting traveler.

In response, Americans panic, convinced the pathogen will soon sweep through the nation—even though only a handful of people in the United States have fallen ill.

That may sound like the current state of affairs with the new coronavirus. While it has killed 1,113 and infected over 44,653 in mainland China, only 13 people have fallen ill with it in the United States and there have been no deaths.

But this is actually a recurring pattern in the United States, where media coverage of a new global health threat causes distress and fear among Americans even though the risk here is fairly limited, experts say.

"While an outbreak is small and simmering it doesn't get much coverage, but then some event happens that creates an onslaught of coverage, some of which is very sensationalistic, and drops the context of what's going on and ends up really panicking people," said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, in Baltimore.

The most recent example before the coronavirus was the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, said Roxane Cohen Silver, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Irvine.

## **Coronavirus panic mirrors reaction to Ebola outbreak**

The Ebola virus killed 11,310 people across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone during its rampage, but it became a source of fear for Americans only after a Liberian traveler fell ill while visiting family in north Texas, Cohen Silver said.

In the end, only four people fell ill with Ebola in the United States. There was only one Ebola [death](#) on these shores, that of the first patient from Liberia, Thomas Eric Duncan.

Nevertheless, fear of Ebola took hold among Americans, particularly those paying a lot of attention to news of the virus, Cohen Silver and her colleagues reported in a 2017 study in *Clinical Psychological Science*.

Increased daily hours of Ebola-related media exposure was significantly associated with a rise in psychological distress and a decrease in a person's ability to handle social and work activities, the researchers found.

"The Ebola crisis in the fall of 2014 received enormous attention in the media and individuals who consumed more of that media were more likely to be worried about contracting Ebola," Cohen Silver said.

## **Americans rushing to buy face masks for protection**

Cohen Silver hastens to say the global threat from the new coronavirus is real, just as it was for Ebola. It's just not an active threat here in the United States at the moment.

"I would suspect individuals in the United States who are consuming a great deal of media about the novel coronavirus are similarly likely to be increasingly worried," Cohen Silver said. "That worry appears at this point to be disproportionate to the risk."

Cohen Silver can see the effects of this fear simply by looking across her college campus, where students have donned face masks to protect them from coronavirus.

"I've seen most messaging saying the wearing of face masks is not

probably necessary in the United States right now, yet on my campus there are many students wearing face masks," Cohen Silver said.

Media accounts sometimes sensationalize the threat of a health crisis, leaving out important context, Adalja and Cohen Silver noted.

For example, the coronavirus death count has played big in the media this week, first that the number of deaths had outpaced those in the 2002 SARS outbreak and then that the death count had passed 1,000, the experts said.

The shocking headlines turned heads, even though only 20 people in North America have fallen ill with the new coronavirus, 13 in the United States and seven in Canada, Cohen Silver said.

## **Coronavirus not as scary as it seems**

Most of the folks who've fallen ill in the United States were travelers who caught the virus in China and then came home. There have been only two cases of human-to-human coronavirus transmission in the United States, and both involved an infected spouse passing the virus to their significant other.

The focus on the number of coronavirus deaths also can be misleading because it doesn't take into account how many people who were infected have died, Adalja added.

"This virus has infected over five times as many people as SARS, so of course it's going to have a higher sheer number of deaths," Adalja explained.

The new coronavirus currently has a death rate of just 2% worldwide, far below the 9% to 12% death rate of the 2002 SARS outbreak and the

40% death rate in the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak.

In fact, that 2% death rate is similar to another virus that Americans are a bit more comfortable with: Flu.

To be fair, some of the concern around coronavirus has been spawned by the lack of clear communication coming out of China, Cohen Silver said.

"We have [limited information](#) coming from trusted sources about this novel virus," Cohen Silver said. "In the absence of information, rumor and conspiracy theories can easily be disseminated because there's limited trusted information to dispute that. It's a situation with a lot of ambiguity."

Lori Freeman, chief executive officer of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, agreed that "there are probably times media coverage can make people more scared and think they have more risk than they do."

## **Media, health officials can inform, not sensationalize**

But Freeman believes coverage of the coronavirus has been relatively free of sensationalism.

"I don't think it's harmful to keep the public alert about the precautions they need to take to prevent the spread of any disease," Freeman said.

"The risk of the infection is low to the general population, but the reason that it is is because our country is taking a really aggressive approach to preventing and delaying the spread in this country, and our tactics are working."

Public health officials can help keep people appropriately informed of the risk posed by a pathogen like coronavirus, Freeman said.

"Local health departments are doing a lot to accurately communicate risk and help ease people's minds, and they're doing that while preparing behind the scenes for broader domestic transmission," Freeman said.

**More information:** Johns Hopkins has more about [coronavirus cases worldwide](#).

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