

There's a virus spreading in U.S. that's killed 10,000: The flu

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(HealthDay)—Folks fretting about the coronavirus are forgetting there's

another virus already running rampant in the United States, one that's killed nearly 20 times as many people in this country alone.

Influenza has already taken the lives of 10,000 Americans this season, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At least 19 million have caught the flu, and an estimated 180,000 became so ill they landed in the hospital.

By comparison, there are 12 confirmed cases of coronavirus in the United States, and just over 31,000 confirmed cases in mainland China, where the virus first emerged. More than 3,800 cases in China are critical, and 636 people there have died from complications of coronavirus infection.

"Influenza is easier to pick up and there are far, far more cases," said Dr. Alan Taeye, an infectious disease physician at the Cleveland Clinic. "It's already much larger than coronavirus has been so far in the whole world, in our own country alone."

It's easy to forget the clear and present danger posed by influenza because it's always there, sickening millions and killing thousands every year during flu season, said Dr. Bernard Camins, medical director for infection prevention at the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City.

"Currently, we have high levels of influenza in the country, which started out really early this year, around Thanksgiving," Camins said. "Pretty much the entire country has high levels of influenza-like illness right now."

The CDC predicts that at least 12,000 Americans will die from the flu in any given year. As many as 61,000 people died in the 2017-2018 flu season, and 45 million were infected.

And it's even worse when a new type of flu virus emerges, mutated into a form against which humans have limited immunity, Camins added.

The H1N1 strain of [influenza](#) first appeared in 2009, and that year there were between 151,700 and 575,400 deaths caused by the new strain, Camins said.

That's why there's a new flu vaccine every year. Influenza is constantly mutating in a Darwinian attempt to become more infectious, and public health officials have to scramble to stay one step ahead.

On the other hand, there are a multitude of different coronaviruses but less than a handful have proven deadly, Taege noted.

"Coronavirus comes in many, many different forms, and most of them are similar to just a cold virus," Taege said. "This will be the third known episode of a coronavirus that had a significant impact on health beyond just a cold," the first two being SARS and MERS.

Coronavirus also appears to be much less infectious than flu, based on what is known at this point. Of the 12 cases in America, only two people caught the virus from another person inside the United States, and in both of those cases the person was infected by a spouse with whom they had constant contact.

By comparison, flu viruses travel through the air in droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks or even breathes. You can catch the flu by inhaling it in the air or by touching a surface upon which the [virus](#) has landed and then touching your eyes, nose and mouth.

It's too early to say how deadly coronavirus will prove, given the inconsistent data coming out of China, Taege said.

"Influenza is a killer. Coronavirus can be, too," Taege said. "We don't have enough data yet to make across-the-board comparisons."

In the meantime, Americans can protect themselves from the health threat already at their doorstep by getting the [flu vaccine](#) if they haven't already, Camins and Taege said.

"The vaccine is still available, and it's not too late to get it," Camins said. "As we learned from last year, in some regions in the country the [flu season](#) didn't end until the first week in May."

Here's how you can also protect yourself from the flu:

- Wash your hands regularly.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid crowds and stay away from sick people.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [this year's flu season](#).

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