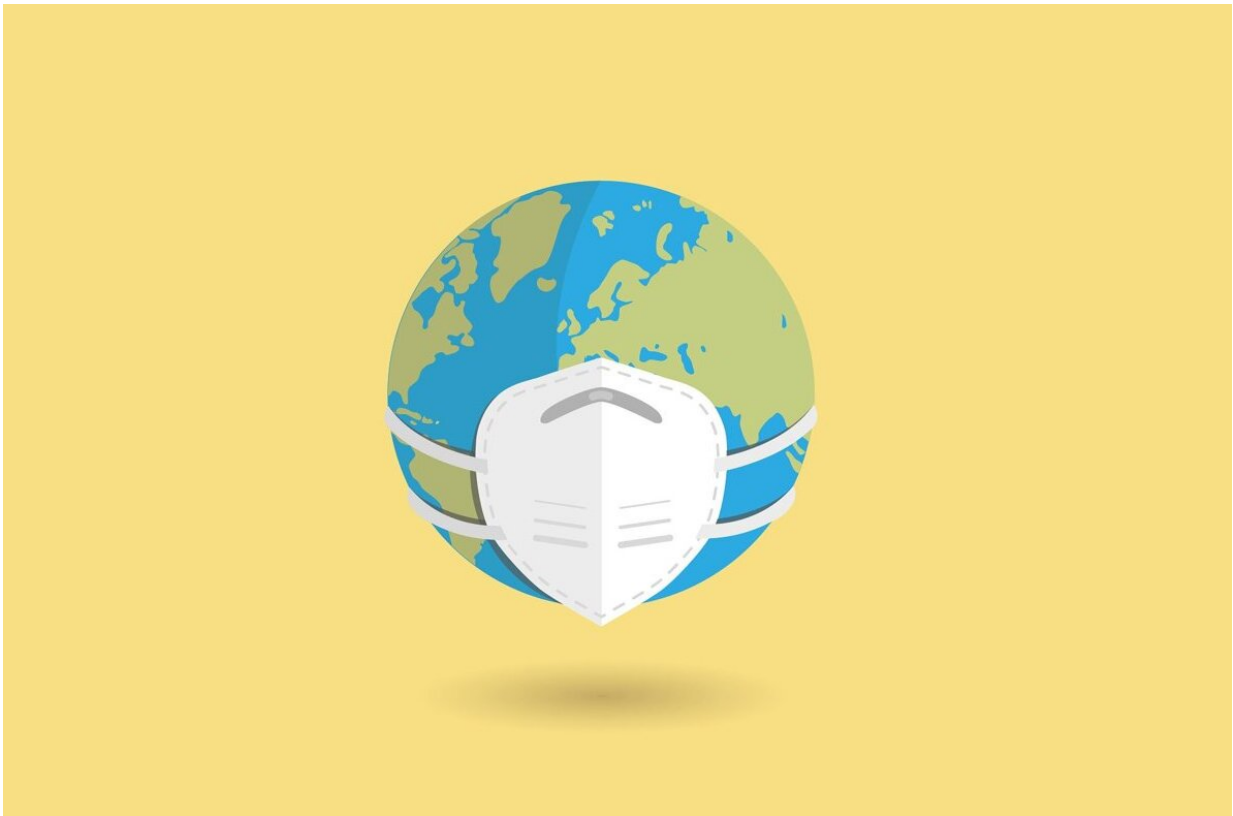


WHO sees COVID posing similar threat to flu this year

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The COVID-19 pandemic could settle down this year to a point where it poses a threat similar to flu, the World Health Organization said Friday.

The WHO voiced confidence that it will be able to declare an end to the emergency some time in 2023, saying it was increasingly hopeful about the [pandemic](#) phase of the virus coming to a close.

Last weekend marked three years since the UN health agency first described the situation as a pandemic—though WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insists countries should have jolted into action several weeks before.

"I think we're coming to that point where we can look at COVID-19 in the same way we look at seasonal influenza," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told a press conference.

"A threat to health, a virus that will continue to kill. But a virus that is not disrupting our society or disrupting our hospital systems, and I believe that that will come, as Tedros said, this year."

The WHO chief said the world was in a much better position now than it has been at any time during the pandemic.

"I am confident that this year we will be able to say that COVID-19 is over as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)," he said.

5,000 deaths a week

The WHO declared a PHEIC—the highest level of alarm it can sound—on January 30, 2020, when, outside of China, fewer than 100 cases and no deaths had been reported.

But it was only when Tedros described the worsening situation as a pandemic on March 11 that year that many countries seemed to wake up to the danger.

"Three years later, there are almost seven million reported deaths from COVID-19, although we know that the actual number of deaths is much higher."

He was pleased that, for the first time, the weekly number of reported deaths over the past four weeks has been lower than when he first described COVID-19 as a pandemic.

But he said more than 5,000 deaths reported per week was 5,000 too many for a disease that can be prevented and treated.

Data emerges

The first infections with the new coronavirus were recorded in late 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

"Even as we become increasingly hopeful about the end of the pandemic, the question of how it began remains unanswered," Tedros said, as he turned to address data that recently came to light concerning the early days of the pandemic.

The data, from the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, relates to samples taken at the Huanan market in Wuhan, in 2020.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID, said they showed [molecular evidence](#) that [animals](#) were sold at the market, including animals susceptible to SARS-CoV-2—the virus that causes COVID-19 disease.

The information was published on the GISAID [global science](#) initiative database in late January, then was taken down again—but not before some scientists downloaded and analysed it, and informed the WHO last weekend.

"These data could have—and should have—been shared three years ago," Tedros lamented.

"We continue to call on China to be transparent in sharing data, and to conduct the necessary investigations and share the results."

Van Kerkhove said all theories about where the outbreak began remain on the table.

They include entering the [human population](#) via a bat, an intermediate host animal, or through a biosecurity breach at a laboratory, she said.

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