

Once upon a time, there was the Spanish Flu

The Spanish Flu of 1918-1919

The culprit H1N1 virus killed over 40 million people between 1918 and 1919, a total that may be compared to the 8.3 million soldiers killed between 1914 and 1918 during World War I. The virus began in China and first circulated through Europe and the United States of America onboard troop transports, then reached Southeast Asia and Africa through land, sea, and air routes. Initially, it was not particularly deadly; the people who fell ill often recovered after suffering only a few days of fever. In a second wave, the virus became ten times more dangerous to the point of becoming lethal among healthy people between the ages of 15 and 35; in contrast, "ordinary" flu statistically affects the youngest and oldest in a population. At the time, it was thought that older people were spared because they had experienced the flu of 1889-1891 and survived.



Some authors believe that the lethal character of the virus may have been acquired on pig farms located on the Great Plains of North America. Deaths were caused by severe primary viral pneumonia that developed very fast (2 days), as well as by secondary bacterial infections caused by *Haemophilus influenzae*, a bacteria species involved in deadly pneumonias and pleurisy.

The name, Spanish Flu, is due to a rumor that the source of contamination in Europe was canned food imported from Spain that supposedly was poisoned by German spies.

During the pandemic, 25 to 30% of the worldwide population caught the flu. Life expectancy dropped 10 years in the space of only a few months. India counted 10 million dead. The United States of America lost 500,000 of its citizens, or more than the cumulated losses from the two World Wars, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam. In France, 400,000 young adults died. Certain Polynesian islands lost 20% of their population while at the same time 60% of Inuits disappeared. Wearing face masks became a daily reality at work and on public transport.

Pigs also were victims of the epidemic, either due to their role in the appearance of the virus, or by transmission from infected people.

Extracts from a medical thesis (1919)

"Despite active treatment: bleeding in the beginning, daily colloidal silver, camphor oil, strychnine, cold packs, fixation abscess, subcutaneous injections of oxygen, by the sixteenth day, the patient succumbed to the flu."

The Spanish Flu rediscovered in 2005

American researchers recreated in a laboratory a virus similar to an avian H1N1 virus. They used a Spanish flu virus discovered in the bodies of Inuits which had been conserved in frozen Alaskan soil for nearly 90 years. The researchers were able to verify the virus' highly pathogenic nature on cultures of human pulmonary cells.