



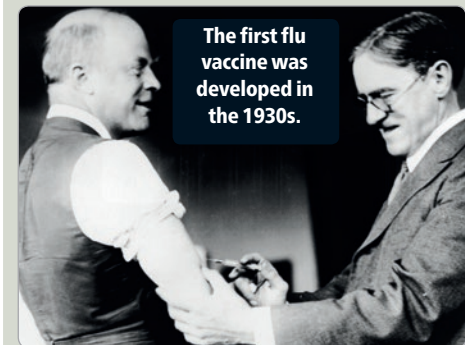
# The deadliest virus of modern times

In 1918, the First World War ended, but humanity was facing a new threat.

A hundred years ago, in 1918, the First World War entered its final year. As British, Canadian, French and US soldiers huddled in muddy trenches and kept a wary watch on the German trenches opposite, both sides were struck by a new enemy. It attacked anyone and could leave a soldier who was healthy at breakfast lying in peril by nightfall. The foe was a microscopic virus that became known as Spanish flu, and it spread across the entire world. By the time that it finally fizzled out in 1920, it had made up to 40% of the world sick and 50 million people had died.

## What is flu?

Flu is short for influenza. It is a common virus that affects around one in 10 of us every year. Viruses are organisms that are smaller than bacteria. They get inside healthy cells and make copies of themselves, making us sick. Flu is often like a cold but can also cause fever, aches and pains and in severe cases, it can be lethal. Thankfully, flu today is not as deadly as Spanish flu. However, there are many different types of flu because it can mutate (change into a new form). This makes it difficult for scientists to create a single vaccine against it, which would prevent people catching it at all. Most people get flu in the winter; scientists believe this may be because the weather conditions at this time of year make it easier for the flu virus to survive.



The first flu vaccine was developed in the 1930s.

**WHY SPAIN?**  
The 1918 flu outbreak was known as Spanish because most people first heard of it from news reports in Spain. No one knows for sure when it first appeared.

## INFLUENZA

Spread by Droplets sprayed from Nose and Throat

Cover each COUGH and SNEEZE with handkerchief.  
Spread by contact.  
AVOID CROWDS.  
If possible, WALK TO WORK.  
Do not spit on floor or sidewalk.  
Do not use common drinking cups and common towels.  
Avoid excessive fatigue.  
If taken ill, go to bed and send for a doctor.  
The above applies also to colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, and tuberculosis.

Warehouses were used to look after patients.

## What made Spanish flu different?

Unlike ordinary flu outbreaks, Spanish flu was exceptionally deadly. It may have infected up to 40% of the world's population and although most people recovered, many were left with long-term health problems. Scientists are still trying to understand what exactly made Spanish flu so deadly. It is likely that it existed in animals or birds before it evolved into a form that could affect humans. For whatever reason, the ease with which it spread made it far more terrible than other flu attacks.



Red Cross nurses had to cover their faces.

## Going viral

Europe was not the only place affected. The US was also struck, with 5,000 people in Philadelphia thought to have died in one week alone. As those who had come from other countries to fight in the First World War returned home, they took the virus with them, with ships carrying Spanish flu to Australia, India, New Zealand, South Africa and elsewhere. The virus was able to spread so far because of advances in modern transport.



Schoolgirls wore protective masks in Japan.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Spanish flu affected all classes. Famous people to survive it included David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister from 1916-22, and Walt Disney.

## Fighting a near-invisible foe

In 1918, people didn't understand viruses as well as they do now, which made stopping their spread even harder. Some newspapers told people to take lots of walks and eat plenty of porridge – which wasn't particularly helpful advice. In some factories and hospitals, smoking was encouraged because people thought it would stop the virus from spreading. In the UK, many churches, dance halls and theatres were shut to stop people from gathering.



All sorts of masks were worn to prevent infection.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Half of all US soldiers in World War I who died in Europe were victims of Spanish flu rather than weapons.

## How is flu spread?

Flu is spread when a sufferer coughs or sneezes the virus into the air. These germs may hang in the air and be inhaled by a person or land on a surface from where they could be transferred onto someone's hands, and from there into their eyes, nose or mouth. You can reduce your risk of catching or spreading flu by washing your hands well and covering your mouth when you cough.



The flu virus can survive on hands and surfaces for 24 hours.

## Is flu still a threat?



New flu vaccines are developed each year.

Many leading scientists and experts are devoted to watching out for any strain of flu that might be as powerful as the 1918 Spanish flu. Because Spanish flu forms the basis for most flu infections today, scientists have a good chance of creating an effective vaccine against it relatively quickly. Each winter in the UK, the National Health Service produces a vaccine against what it expects will be the most common flu of the season and offers it to those most at risk, such as the elderly. The real risk is that an entirely new flu strain will emerge and this is why governments around the world take flu so seriously and have emergency plans in place. The most important thing is to be prepared.