The 1918 Influenza - A Deadly Natural Disaster

The 1918 influenza, or 1918 flu, was an unusually deadly pandemic caused by the influenza A virus. The 1918 flu pandemic lasted for three years, from January 1918 to December 1920 and was spread in three waves. The second wave was the deadliest. Over those three waves, over 500 million people were infected across the world, and between 50 million and 100 million died.

Who was affected and what happened when they got sick?

Often, influenza outbreaks kill the very young, the very old, and those who are already weakened or ill. This was true for the 1918 flu, but the 1918 flu was also unique. The 1918 flu also killed many healthy young adults. Doctors diagnosed cases of the flu when people came to see them feeling tired and achy with fevers. Over time, some patients developed pneumonia (a disease where the air sacs in the lungs become filled with fluid). Researchers found that many of the people who died had suffered from an overreaction of the body's immune system called a cytokine storm. The strong immune systems of young adults tried to fight off the virus, which caused problems in many areas of the body.
Centers for Disease Control

Graph shows combined influenza and pneumonia deaths by age group, per 100,000 persons in each age group in the United States. The dashed line is 1911-1917 before the pandemic and the solid line is during the pandemic in 1918.

Where did the 1918 flu start and how did it spread?

No one knows exactly where the 1918 flu started. One of the first recorded cases of the flu was in an army cook at a camp in Kansas. The virus quickly spread person to person through respiratory droplets within the army camp and after a month, 1,100 troops had become ill and 38 had died. During 1918, US troops deployed to Europe for World War I and carried the influenza virus with them to England, France, Spain, and Italy. With the movement of troops during World War I, the virus continued to spread throughout the entire world, reaching almost every country. Most countries experienced a high number of cases and many people died. By 1920, the year many consider to be the end of the pandemic, 12-17 million people had died in India. In Finland, 20,000 died. In Japan, 23 million were affected, and over 350,000 died. In the United States, 28% of the population became ill, and between 500,000 and 800,000 died. It took medical scientists and researchers more than 80 years to discover more details about the origins of the 1918 flu. In 1997, genetic material was discovered in preserved tissues of people who died from the virus. This allowed the scientists to understand patterns by piecing together historical information with modern medicine.

How did people respond?

To maintain morale, wartime censors limited public reports of illness and flu-related deaths in Germany, England, France, and the United States. Some newspapers did report the illnesses and deaths happening in Spain, which gave the false impression that Spain was the most impacted. This is why the 1918 flu is sometimes referred to as the Spanish flu, though there is no evidence that this is where the flu began nor was Spain the hardest hit nation.
Many people died quickly as a result of viral infection in 1918. The lack of information about the disease may have contributed to more people becoming infected. Once many people became ill and died, local governments enforced social distancing by closing schools, theaters, and places of worship, and limiting public transportation and the size of group gatherings. Mask wearing became common in some places, but there was some resistance to their use. Eventually the number of cases diminished and the steep rise in infection rate and death in the population fell over time. The 1918 influenza pandemic was a natural disaster that changed the way people responded to community health forever in the form of various technologies, the push for annual flu vaccines, and better personal hygiene practices.

Sources:

1918 pandemic (H1N1 virus): https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html
Why the second wave of the 1918 Spanish flu was so deadly: https://www.history.com/news/spanish-flu-second-wave-resurgence
The deadliest flu: The complete story of the discovery and reconstruction of the 1918 pandemic virus: https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html