Epidemics and Pandemics

When an unusually large number of people in a community, state, or country contract a contagious disease at more or less the same time, it is called an epidemic. Typhus, influenza, the Black Death (Bubonic Plague), malaria, and smallpox are all examples of epidemics in history. An epidemic can have various causes. Infectious disease can spread if an area’s food or water gets infected. Disease can also begin to spread rapidly because it has gotten more virulent (severe or harmful). Often, an epidemic will begin when a new disease is introduced to a population where that disease has never appeared before. For example, when Europeans brought smallpox to North America, it killed about 90% of the Native American population. Epidemics can begin in places where famine and malnutrition have lowered a population’s resistance to disease. They can also begin in areas where a natural disaster or a war has destroyed infrastructure, infected water, introduced a new disease, or lowered the disease resistance of the population.

When an epidemic grows so much that people in multiple countries and across multiple continents get sick, it is called a pandemic. Pandemics don’t happen too frequently, but there have been many throughout history. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), pandemics generally unfold across six stages, beginning when a virus is found in animals, but not in humans, and officially becoming a pandemic when the virus has spread globally. The most recent pandemic was coronavirus 19 (COVID-19), which began in China in late 2019 and quickly spread throughout the world.

Probably the worst pandemic in history was the Bubonic Plague, which we now know was spread by fleas living on rats. This disease affects the lymph glands, which become large and swollen (a condition called "buboes.") Without medical treatment, about half of the people who contract the Bubonic Plague will die. Today, the disease can be treated with antibiotics.

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