What Is A Pandemic?

A pandemic is an epidemic that has grown and spread to the point that people in multiple countries and across multiple continents get sick. 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, currently still ongoing, is coronavirus 19 (COVID-19), which began in China in late 2019 and quickly spread throughout the world. In 2002, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) coronavirus also originated in China, dying off the following year. The Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) coronavirus originated in Saudi Arabia in 2012 and continues to infect people today.

In fact, there have been pandemics throughout human history. Probably the worst pandemic in history was the Bubonic Plague, which we now know was spread by fleas living on rats. The first major outbreak was in 541 and 542 A.D., when it was known as the Plague of Justinian. A second massive outbreak, known as the Black Death, happened between 1347 and 1350, killed between 75 and 200 million people in Europe. It returned to Europe several more times up until the 18th century.

A pandemic is an extremely serious situation that can have long-term social, legal, economic, and political consequences. For instance, when about half the population of Europe died of the Black Death, the supply of labor was so low that remaining serfs were able to ask their lords for more money. The lords, who were dependent on serf labor to maintain their fiefs, had to give the serfs what they asked for, or else make do with less production from their land. Serfs could also seek higher wages working elsewhere. With more money, serfs were able to rise in social stature. This created something of a middle class in Medieval Europe where none had existed before and helped to bring about the end of feudalism in Europe.