

Influenza 1918



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International

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Influenza 1918 is the story of the worst epidemic the United States has ever known. Before it was over, the flu would kill more than 600,000 Americans—more than all the combat deaths of this century combined.

Meanwhile, returning American troops were bringing the flu back home. First hundreds, then thousands, of soldiers were lining up outside infirmaries and hospitals at army bases across the country, falling ill with a swiftness that defied belief.

It was a flu unlike any other. People could be healthy in the morning and dead by nightfall. Others died more slowly, suffocating from the buildup of liquid in their lungs.

Researchers had developed vaccines for many bacterial diseases: smallpox, anthrax, rabies, diphtheria, meningitis. But doctors were helpless to stop the influenza of 1918. They knew the disease spread through the air, but medical researchers were unable to see the tiny virus through microscopes and incorrectly identified its cause as a bacteria.

Many people turned to folk remedies: garlic, camphor balls, kerosene on sugar, boneset tea. Public health officials distributed masks, closed schools; laws forbade spitting on the streets. Nothing worked. People coughed on each other; infected each other. Soldiers traveled in crowded transport ships. The disease spread everywhere.

October 1918 saw the epidemic's full horror: more than 195,000 people died in America alone. There was a nationwide casket shortage. In Philadelphia, the dead were left in gutters and stacked in caskets on the front porches. Trucks drove the city streets, picking up the caskets and corpses. People hid indoors, afraid to interact with their friends and neighbors.

Surgeon General Victor Vaughan reached a frightening conclusion. "If the epidemic continues its mathematical rate of acceleration," he announced, "civilization could easily disappear from the face of the earth within a few weeks."

Then, just as suddenly as it struck, the disease began to vanish. By mid-November, the numbers of dead were plunging. "In light of our knowledge of influenza," says Dr. Shirley Fannin, a public health official, "we do understand that it probably ran out of fuel. It ran out of people who were susceptible and could be infected."

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