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Public Health Pandemics

Before 2020, an event like the COVID-19 Pandemic seemed unthinkable. However, we lived through one of the most significant public health events in human history. Another major pandemic that was seen in the United States in the past twenty years was the H1N1 Influenza.

Emerging in 2009, the H1N1 strain spread to more than 208 countries worldwide and infected at least 622,000 people.¹ Due to this being a strain of Influenza, the general population may have felt more “comfortable” because we have a flu season every year. While the strain each year may be different, people are more comfortable with the word “flu” than “coronavirus”.

Adherence to mitigation measures such as hand washing and staying home while sick would reduce the spread of disease in both viruses, but because people were more familiar with the flu than the coronavirus, it seems that there was less panic during the 2009 H1N1 outbreak. Furthermore, face masks were not widely worn or promoted during the 2009 outbreak, possibly because of the belief that they would not be effective for the public.²

Another outbreak of concern that emerged this century was the MERS outbreak in Saudi Arabia. While it did not infect nearly as many people as COVID-19 or H1N1 Influenza, it was more fatal for those who did get infected. Most infections were believed to come from Dromedary Camels, which are prevalent in the region.³

While there have been vaccine candidates in the pipeline to help prevent this severe disease, none have made it to market.³ This means the main ways to prevent becoming infected are to avoid contact with Dromedary Camels and practice good hand washing and hygiene habits. However, because camels are so important to the region, it was hard for them to avoid complete contact. This meant adherence to guidance to avoid the animals was difficult, and in some cases, impossible.

References

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