

## The Spanish Influenza Pandemic

The Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 was among the most deadly in world history. Only the Black Death plague in the Middle Ages rivals Spanish influenza in terms of the number of people afflicted and the number of those killed by the disease.

This strain of the influenza A virus (later to be called H1N1) likely came from birds and proved to be highly infectious. About 20-30% of the population would get the disease and 5-10% of them would die. All this, of course, was unknown to public health officials and medical researchers. It was not even known that influenza was a virus at the time.

Scientists now believe that the flu originated in Kansas and was carried to Europe by American soldiers in March, 1918. Over the spring and summer, the flu spread across Europe. It was called the Spanish influenza because most of the early reports of the pandemic came from Spain which was not in the war and thus did not suffer from wartime restrictions on the media. By the fall it had returned to the U. S. and spread from coast to coast. About 675,000 Americans died from the deadly virus.

Although there is no cure for it, Spanish influenza vanished as quickly as it came. But not before over 50 million people had been killed around the world.



*Policemen like these in Seattle in December, 1918, were on the front lines of the battle against Spanish influenza.*

*Photo: National Archives*