

Why everything is closing for coronavirus: It's called "flattening the curve"

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Image 1. Authorities control a line of motorists waiting to be tested for coronavirus at Glen Island Park in New Rochelle, New York, March 13, 2020. Closing areas such as parks is an essential part of the social distancing needed to slow the COVID-19 outbreak. Photo: John Minchillo/AP Photo

Schools have recently been shutting down all over the country. They are moving instruction online. Some sporting events are being canceled. Other sporting events are being delayed.

The 2020 Summer Olympics are supposed to happen in Japan. The Olympics' future is not clear.

Some festivals and conferences are also being canceled. Others are being delayed.

The cause for all these closures is COVID-19. It is a flu-like illness. COVID-19 is short for coronavirus disease 2019. It began in China. It has been spreading across the globe since December 2019.

There have been around 1,660 cases of COVID-19 diagnosed in the United States. There have been fewer than 50 deaths because of it.

Serious Spread

All the closures are costing money. So are the delayed events. Still, sporting events and businesses are being canceled. This shows how serious the spread of coronavirus is.

Health officials are telling people to not gather in groups. This helps prevent the spread of the virus.

Many people talk about the flu. Every year the flu makes millions of people sick. It kills tens of thousands of people. The flu is expected to make 50 million people sick this year. That is just in the United States. It is expected to kill as many as 52,000 people.

So why is everyone making such a big deal about coronavirus? Why are events being canceled? Why are classes being moved online? Especially when there are so few cases right now.

Making Sure Sick People Can Get Treated

There's a good reason to "cancel everything." The goal is to slow down the spread of the virus. This will also make sure people who do get sick can get treated. If someone gets coronavirus, they have to go to the hospital. If a lot of people get sick at the same time, the hospital will get full quickly. Too many people can't get sick. There is not enough space in hospitals. This is happening in Italy.

If people only get sick a little at a time it's better. That way hospitals can take care of them. It is more manageable. This is called "flattening the curve." And that is how it looks when you draw it out.

Epidemiologists study diseases. They try to predict how diseases spread. They look at how the disease behaves. If everyone acted like normal and did not limit social interaction the number of cases would increase. The number of people infected would grow quickly. They would overwhelm hospitals. This will result in more people dying. This is happening in Italy. There are not enough hospital beds or medicine for everyone who is sick. There aren't even enough healthy doctors and nurses to take care of everyone at once.

But are we really headed for that many cases?

Yes.

So what do we do to prevent disaster? We have to flatten the curve. Fortunately, people are listening.

Clearly, public officials and businesses are listening to the warnings of public health officials. This shows in all the closings and cancellations. But to be effective, ordinary people need to do their part by avoiding as much as possible any crowds and places where large numbers of people congregate. This includes movie theaters, malls and events that haven't been canceled.

