



# The centennial of a devastating outbreak

# Modern Healthcare

**One hundred years ago this month**, the “mother of all pandemics” was sweeping the world. The flu pandemic was caused by an airborne H1N1 avian virus and killed an estimated 1% to 2% of the world’s population in 1918 and 1919. The victims were primarily young and often healthy adults. The pandemic struck during World War I, killing more than the 17 million who died in that

conflict; it is still considered one of the deadliest disease outbreaks in recorded history. The 1918 pandemic came to be dubbed the Spanish flu not because it originated there but because Spain was neutral in the war and so reported freely on the outbreak. The U.S. and other countries at war suppressed information about the severity of the disease so as not to damage morale.

## APRIL 5, 1918

**Weekly public health report** tells of first U.S. flu fatalities with three deaths in Haskell, Kan.

**100,000 TO 195,000**

**Number of U.S. deaths in October 1918** alone during the deadly second wave of the pandemic, which hit from September through November, beginning in the Boston area

**675,000**

**Number of deaths** in the U.S. attributed to the pandemic

**40%**

**Decline in shipyard productivity** reported in New York City due to flu illnesses in the midst of World War I

**12 YEARS**

**The number of years that life expectancy** in the U.S. had fallen by 1919 because of the pandemic, to 36.6 years for men and 42.2 years for women



**Influenza victims crowd into an emergency hospital near Fort Riley, Kan., in this 1918 file photo. The Spanish flu pandemic killed millions worldwide and officials say if the next pandemic resembles the birdlike 1918 flu, up to 1.9 million Americans could die.**

**500 MILLION**

**The number of people worldwide** who became infected with the virus, about one-third of the world’s population

**50 MILLION**

**Number of deaths worldwide** attributed to the pandemic

**ZERO**

**Number of laboratory tests** to diagnose, detect or characterize the flu in 1918

**2005**

**The year CDC researchers** were able to physically reconstruct the 1918 pandemic virus with reverse genetics. They found the HA and PB1 virus genes made for “maximum replication and virulence”

—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; numbers for deaths and infections are only estimates but are based on CDC research.