

# The 1918 influenza pandemic

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# (MCH, 2020yyy) [Pandemics]

In the early 21st century, anxiety over the danger of Influenza A virus subtypes H5N1 (avian flu) and H1N1 (swine flu), and the COVID-19 coronavirus, has revived interest in New Zealand's worst disease outbreak, the lethal influenza pandemic that struck between October and December 1918. In two months New Zealand lost about half as many people to influenza as it had in the whole of the First World War. No other event has killed so many New Zealanders in such a short time.

Many people believed that this severe form of influenza was borne by 'a deadly new virus' that arrived on the Royal Mail liner *Niagara* on 12 October, but this is unlikely to have been the case. However the pandemic arose, by the time it eased in December about 9000 New Zealanders had died. Māori suffered heavily, with about 2500 deaths. But death did not occur evenly among either Māori or Pākehā. Some communities were decimated, while others escaped largely unscathed. The only places struck with uniform severity were military camps.

There were consistencies, though, in the ways in which the country responded to the crisis. Committees were established to coordinate relief efforts, and areas were divided into blocks or districts, each with its own depot or bureau. Many public facilities and businesses closed, and public events and gatherings were postponed. With the medical workforce already stretched due to the war, volunteers filled the gaps, whether in their own household or in their local community.

In the aftermath, the public sought answers from the government. What they got was a major reorganisation in the form of the 1920 Health Act, which Geoffrey Rice, author of *Black November: the 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand*, describes as 'the most useful legacy' of the pandemic.

COVID-19 (novel coronavirus)

See the Ministry of Health website for information about New Zealand's response to COVID-19 (novel coronavirus).

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