

Page 4. The influenza era, 1890s to 1920s

The 1890s to the 1920s were dominated by two influenza pandemics (1890–94 and 1918), with annual epidemics in between.

Plague made its first and only New Zealand appearance in 1900, but it caused only a handful of deaths and disappeared after 1911. There were outbreaks of measles and whooping cough in 1907, and diphtheria in 1917.

1913 Northland smallpox epidemic

Smallpox is a highly infectious viral disease, which used to be a major killer worldwide before the discovery of effective vaccination in the late 18th century. Mass immunisation campaigns in the 19th and 20th centuries eventually eradicated smallpox – it now exists only in laboratory storage.

Small pox, big effect

Smallpox is at first hard to distinguish from chickenpox, but it is much more dangerous, and as the disease develops two types of case can be fatal: when the spots bleed and become septic, or if the rash extends into the air-passages, blocking the windpipe. Many survivors were forever marked by smallpox scars.

The most significant outbreak occurred in 1913 in Northland. It was traced to a Mormon missionary who caught smallpox on a ship sailing to New Zealand from Canada. After he attended a [hui](#) in Northland in April 1913 the disease spread rapidly. Most of the 2,000 reported cases were Māori, as were the 55 who died.

A mass vaccination programme was set up and travel restrictions imposed to slow the spread of infection. Newspapers made much of the outbreak, blaming the epidemic on lack of sanitation and poor living conditions among Māori, yet Māori were much more willing to receive vaccination than many [Pākehā](#).

The epidemic was declared over by December 1913, though the last case was only notified in April 1914.

1918 influenza pandemic

New Zealand's worst disease disaster to date is the influenza pandemic of November 1918, which killed more than 50 million people worldwide, and 9,000 in New Zealand. No other recorded influenza pandemic has been so deadly – and nobody knows why it was so lethal.

P.

It occurred in the wake of the [First World War](#), when the movement of large numbers of troops by sea and rail greatly facilitated the spread of infection. Troops returning to New Zealand brought the virus from [Europe](#). It reached epidemic proportions from late October, peaked in late November and was over by early December. Many people believed that the killer virus was brought to New Zealand by the passenger ship *Niagara*, which docked in Auckland on 12 October 1918 full of influenza sufferers. Prime Minister [William Massey](#) and Finance Minister Sir [Joseph Ward](#) were on board. Critics later argued that they arranged for the ship to avoid quarantine, but this was not the case, and the *Niagara* was later conclusively ruled out as the source of infection.

Perils of being the breadwinner

Symptoms exhibited by sufferers included chills, fever, runny nose, sore throat, coughs, headache and muscular pain. The real killer in 1918 was pneumonia – a secondary infection. The skin of some people who caught pneumonia darkened because

It has been suggested that the reason far more men than women died during the 1918 influenza pandemic is that men were typically the family breadwinners, so had to go out to work instead of staying home when sick to recover. Dairy farmers were at greater risk of collapsing or relapsing than other more sedentary professions, because they had to milk cows twice every day.

of burst blood vessels. If the whole body became virtually black this often meant death was imminent. Later in life, sufferer Grace Stewart described her experience: 'I was in bed for six weeks. My fingers and fingernails went black. My tongue was covered with some sort of fungus half an inch thick ... The pain in the whole of my body was terrible.'¹

Unlike in other countries, where male and female deaths were about equal, New Zealand death rates for males were double those for females in the worst-affected age groups. The Māori death rate was more than eight times that for Pākehā. The highest regional death rates for Pākehā were in Southland, King Country, Wellington and Auckland. Auckland city had the

largest Pākehā death toll at 1,128 (7.6 per 1,000). Nationwide, 135 Pākehā children lost both parents, while 6,415 lost one.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Geoffrey W. Rice, *Black November: the 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand*. 2nd edition. Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005, p. 86.

How to cite this page:

Geoff Rice, 'Epidemics - The influenza era, 1890s to 1920s', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/epidemics/page-4> (accessed 7 July 2023)
Story by Geoff Rice, published 5 May 2011, reviewed & revised 15 May 2018
