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Is COVID-19 Just The Flu, Or Is It Worst?
Advice Column

Dear, Richard Fernandez

My friend has been telling me not to worry about COVID-19. He says that COVID-19 is just another flu, and that we should just go back to living our lives how we did before the pandemic started. He has argued that COVID-19 has the same death, and infection rate as the flu. He has also said that most people who catch COVID-19 only experience mild symptoms, and that social distancing rules have had little effect on the infection rate of the virus. He believes that social distancing rules were just put in place as a way for the government to trample on our civil liberties. Is my friend right about COVID-19, or should we be taking the virus more seriously than him?

Regards, John Doe

Dear, John Doe

Your friend actually stated a lot of misconceptions about COVID-19. COVID-19, and the flu, do have some things in common, which explains why a lot of people will often compare these two diseases to each other. It's true that, just like the flu, most people who catch COVID-19 only experience mild to moderate symptoms, "80 percent" (Willis, ABC Premium News, March 20, 2020) to be exact. However, a higher percentage of people develop severe symptoms from COVID-19 than the flu. An article from ABC Premium News reported that according to the World Health Organization, "fifteen per cent of COVID-19 cases are severe infections that require oxygen, and five per cent are critical infections, requiring ventilation" (Willis, ABC Premium News, March 20, 2020). You should tell your friend that social distancing actually does help lower the infection rate of COVID-19, at least if the social distancing rules are put in place early enough. There is an academic journal that states "early introduction of social distancing rules" has been proven to "reduce the R0" of COVID-19. R0 refers to the number of other people who catch the virus from one infected individual (Petersen, pp. e238–e244).

You should also tell your friend that COVID-19 actually has both a higher death rate, and infection rate, than the flu. The R0 value or infection rate for seasonal influenza, also known as the flu varies, but "it is estimated to be around 1.3" (Willis, ABC Premium News, March 20, 2020). That means that a person with the flu will only spread the virus to one other person on average. On April 7th, 2020, the United States Center for Disease Control published an analysis of the infection rate of COVID-19 which estimated that, "on average, each person who caught the virus in Wuhan, China may have infected five to six other people" (Green, YouTube, 1 May 2020). The death rate of people infected with the flu varies by age group, but is usually lower than the rate for people infected with Covid-19. According to this academic journal, the mortality rate or death rate for seasonal flu was "0.1 to 6.4 per 100,000 for people younger than 65 years old, 2.9 to 44.0 per 100,000 for people aged, 65 to 74 years old, and 17.9 to 223.5 per 100,000 for people aged 75 years and older" (Petersen, pp. e238–e244). The same journal stated that "On June 8, 2020, the mortality rate for COVID-19 in Lombardy, Italy, reached 159 per 100,000

people.” My advice for you would be to take COVID-19 more seriously than seasonal flu, and to educate your friends, and relatives about COVID-19. Prepare yourself for questions they may ask. Do research beforehand so you can answer them in an educated and honest way.

Take care

Regards, Richard Fernandez

Works cited

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2. By health reporter Olivia Willis. "How does coronavirus COVID-19 compare to flu?". ABC Premium News (Australia), March 20, 2020 Friday.
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3. “Why Is This Virus So Contagious?” Performance by Hank Green, YouTube, 1 May 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXfb2okvzds.