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Why Our Obsession With Epidemics Is Actually a Good Thing

By *Korin Miller* // January 28, 2016 5:20 Am



Obsessively follow health epidemics like H1N1 and Zika virus in the news? You're not alone—and new research says it's actually a good thing.

A new study published in the *Journal of Theoretical Biology* found that mass media coverage of epidemics (and our subsequent fascination with them) can actually help slow the spread of disease.

For the study, scientists studied the impact of media coverage on the 2009 H1N1 outbreak in the Chinese city of Xi'an. Researchers compared the number of hospital visits with the number and length of news reports about H1N1 at the time.

What they discovered: The more media outlets reported on H1N1 and the longer the coverage, the less people were diagnosed with new cases of the flu. The reverse was true too: When coverage wasn't as high, more people were hospitalized with the flu.

What's going on here? Researchers say that when we see reports on health epidemics, we take note and promptly change our behavior to avoid getting sick. In the case of the flu, more people tried to avoid contact with others, which led to less people becoming infected.

Study co-author Jianhong Wu, Ph.D., Canada Research Chair and director of the York Institute for Health Research at Canada's York University, says his work is evidence that it's actually good for us to closely follow the news (and change our behavior accordingly) when a health epidemic is happening.

But why do we become so obsessed with epidemics in the first place? Licensed clinical psychologist Alicia H. Clark, Psy.D., says it's because they remind us that we're vulnerable.

"Our curiosity about life and its fragility is seemingly insatiable," she says. "Following the news of epidemics allows us to understand their scope, their danger, and ultimately their threat to us."

Of course, there's a fine line between following the news of an epidemic closely and freaking out over it. To keep yourself in check, Clark recommends zeroing in on meaningful and helpful action that you can take to protect yourself. With a flu outbreak, get vaccinated, practice good hand hygiene, and take care of yourself—that's really all you can do.

Then, take a break from all the media coverage and focus instead on what's happening your own life vs. what might happen. "While it's important to stay informed so you can protect yourself, our bodies and minds can only absorb so much" says Clark. "Be gentle with yourself and beware of overexposing yourself."

Speaking of epidemics, check out this video on the social "epidemic" that's spreading among teens:

