

The Pandemic Turns 5. Are we prepared for the Next One?

Today is March 11, 2025, which reflects on the five-year mark since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. As the world looks back, both successes and mistakes in the U.S. response to the crisis are being evaluated by public health experts.

Here are some key takeaways:

Kudos to the First Responders – medical professionals, law enforcements, all the essential workers and all the local, state and federal agencies who provided their selfless service and expertise and dedication round-the-clock to keep us all safe and alive for months. We are so thankful and proud of them for their service.

COVID's Impact and Evolution:

- The pandemic drastically altered daily life, causing widespread illness, death, and social upheaval. Hospitals were overwhelmed in many places, and cities locked down to try to contain the virus.
- Currently, COVID-19 is less of an emergency than in the early years, with fewer hospitalizations and deaths, thanks in part to high immunity levels from both infections and vaccinations. Effective treatments, such as antivirals and vaccines, have also helped reduce the severity of the disease.
- Despite these improvements, COVID-19 is still causing deaths worldwide, and experts stress that the virus is far from gone, with localized infection waves continuing to occur.

Successes:

- The rapid development of mRNA vaccines was one of the most significant scientific triumphs. Within 11 months of sequencing the virus, two highly effective vaccines were developed. The response was significantly bolstered by the collaboration between the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Operation Warp Speed.
- Public health measures such as stay-at-home orders, when implemented early, helped slow transmission and prevented overwhelming hospitals, which showed that “flattening the curve” worked.

Mistakes and Lessons Learned:

- **Testing Failures:** Early in the pandemic, the U.S. testing strategy was a disaster. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a flawed test, creating a significant bottleneck. Experts now agree that testing should be more widely available through the private sector.
- **Missteps in Mask Guidance:** There was initial resistance to acknowledging that COVID-19 could spread through airborne particles, leading to confusion regarding mask-wearing. While the World Health Organization (WHO) eventually expanded its guidelines, it could have communicated more clearly from the start.
- **School Closures:** School closures remain a controversial issue. While initially necessary, their long duration and the shift to online schooling led to negative impacts on children’s mental health and education. Experts suggest that more sustainable measures, like improving ventilation and masking, could have minimized disruptions.
- **Misinformation and Polarization:** The pandemic became heavily politicized, particularly in the U.S. Public health measures like mask mandates and vaccines became

divisive, with misinformation playing a significant role. This polarization led to a tragic disparity in death rates across political lines.

Preparedness for Future Pandemics:

- While the experience of COVID-19 has provided valuable lessons, experts warn that the U.S. may now be less prepared for the next pandemic. A critical issue is the public's trust in science and public health agencies, which has eroded over the course of the pandemic.
- On the other hand, there are positives, such as the experience gained in responding to pandemics. If another pandemic occurs, there are existing vaccine platforms and preparedness frameworks that can be used more swiftly.
- However, maintaining momentum in pandemic preparedness is difficult, and continued investment in public health systems is crucial for future global health threats.

Reflections on Global Cooperation:

- Experts urge for continued global collaboration in pandemic preparedness, especially with pathogens that do not respect borders. The WHO and national governments must work together to strengthen public health infrastructures and increase surveillance and risk assessment to prevent future outbreaks from escalating into global crises.

Overall, while the fight against COVID-19 showed significant progress, it also highlighted deep divisions in public health messaging, trust in science, and preparedness for future health emergencies. With current changes in reducing federal workforce, there are 500 less professional in CDC and 1000 less professionals in NIH, we will be at a higher risk and face many challenges to respond to a next pandemic or other public health crisis. – **Article: Health Camp of New Jersey**