

OPINION**Ebel: Addressing the novel coronavirus**

Joe Ebel, Guest Columnist Published 10:53 a.m. ET Feb. 13, 2020 | Updated 10:54 a.m. ET Feb. 13, 2020

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak a global health emergency. This is largely due to concerns about the potential spread of the disease to countries with weak public health systems who lack the resources to respond to cases that occur in their communities.

In the U.S. and in Ohio, we have a robust public health system, that, while underfunded, is prepared to respond to new cases of this disease. During the H1N1 flu pandemic response in 2009-10, the Licking County Health Department staff vaccinated 25,000 residents, holding mass vaccination clinics at school buildings across the county and at the health department's clinic. H1N1 was also a novel (new) virus strain which increased the risk of rapid spread. Because it was new, no one had immunity to the virus, and no vaccine was available. Over time, a vaccine was approved, and the CDC prioritized high risk populations to get the first doses until supplies increased and the vaccine was available to everyone. H1N1 is still one of the dominant flu strains circulating each year and is included in the current flu vaccine.

Outbreaks of novel virus infections among people are always of public health concern. The risk from these outbreaks depends on characteristics of the virus, including whether and how well it spreads between people, the severity of resulting illness, and the availability of a vaccine or treatment medications.

2019-nCoV is a serious public health threat. The fact that this virus has caused severe illness and sustained person-to-person spread in China is concerning. The goal of the ongoing U.S. public health response is to contain this outbreak and prevent sustained spread of 2019-nCoV in this country.

The good news is that the messages that we communicate every year to prevent the flu are the same that we recommend for 2019-nCoV control.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

While there are very few 2019-nCoV cases in the U.S., we are still in the middle of a very active flu season that will cause the deaths of tens of thousands this year. The CDC recommends getting your flu vaccine, taking everyday preventive actions to stop the spread of germs, and taking flu antivirals if prescribed.

The public health system is always working behind the scenes to prevent and control disease outbreaks. When new threats arise, our teams of public health workers including doctors, nurses, epidemiologists, communication specialists, emergency response and preparedness staff, and all of our state and local public health workforce, rises to challenge and uses their many skills to protect the health of all of our citizens.

Please join me in thanking our public health workers for the vital work that they do every day to help keep us all healthy by preventing disease, promoting healthy lifestyles, and protecting our environment.



Joe Ebel (Photo: Submitted photo)

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