

Doctors around world say COVID-19 may be losing its potency, becoming less deadly

Doctors in Italy, Israel, and U.S. say the coronavirus may be losing its potency and becoming less deadly even as it spreads.

Doctors across the world are offering preliminary but encouraging reports that the coronavirus may be losing steam and becoming less deadly: a behavior observed in at least one respiratory pandemic before, and a welcome sign for a world-weary of nonstop COVID-19 fears.

Optimism over the coronavirus has been in short supply since January, when public health officials and politicians began publicly and repeatedly speculating that COVID-19 may be a semi-permanent fixture of global life for the foreseeable future, possibly for years.

The phrase “the new normal” has become an omnipresent part of American life, with medical experts such as Dr. Anthony Fauci speculating that Americans may never shake each other’s hands again, and some officials imagining that “social distancing” may persist into 2022 if not beyond.

But numerous prominent doctors and scientists in the last few weeks and months have begun to question that narrative, pointing to evidence that suggests the coronavirus may, unexpectedly, be dying out on its own.

Virus appears to behave the same regardless of lockdown measures

Yitzhak Ben Israel, a professor at Tel Aviv University, offered early speculation to that effect when in April he said, based on the observed behavior of the virus across the globe, that the virus appears to function more or less the same no matter what a country does to mitigate it. He said the virus appears to follow a fixed pattern in which there is “a decline in the number of infections even [in countries] without closures” that is “similar to the countries with closures.”

Those observations may indicate that the virus is not an unstoppable juggernaut: If it works more or less the same with or without mitigation efforts, then it is

likely less of a danger than was initially imagined, insofar as the disease is less hampered by lockdowns than experts thought but also less deadly without them than was initially feared.

Yet apart from the epidemiological path the pandemic might or might not take, there are also signs that the virus itself is weakening, growing less potent, more diffuse and less deadly, meaning that even if a region experiences a significant amount of infections, it may amount to fewer hospitalizations and deaths than medical experts have predicted over the past few months.

That's the contention of two top Italian doctors, who argued this week that the disease appears to be rapidly declining in potency. The coronavirus "clinically no longer exists in Italy," San Raffaele Hospital Director Alberto Zangrillo told Reuters, claiming that recent swabs of infected patients have shown "a viral load in quantitative terms that was absolutely infinitesimal compared to the ones carried out a month or two months ago."

Matteo Bassetti, meanwhile—the head of the infectious diseases clinic at the San Martino hospital in Genoa—said that "the strength the virus had two months ago is not the same strength it has today" and that "it is clear that today the COVID-19 disease is different."

The Italian government is still cautioning its citizens to continue to treat the virus as highly dangerous.

Yet those remarks from two high-ranking Italian physicians are notable: Italy was for a time the hardest-hit country in the world, and remains in unadjusted rankings the country with the fourth-most reported coronavirus deaths worldwide. Images of Italy's brutally crumbling healthcare system—with patients dying on gurneys in hallways, doctors collapsing after working days without sleep, and hospitals having to figure out to whom they should administer care and whom they should allow to die—galvanized much of the rest of the world into shutting down their countries for months.

Indeed, "the next Italy" became a running phrase throughout much of March, as leaders feared their countries could be overrun by the virus in a similar fashion. If the onetime global epicenter of COVID-19 is seeing a virus that's "declining in potency," that could very well mean the disease is doomed to weaken, and perhaps eventually disappear.

Gene deletion could point to a weakening virus

Some physicians and scientists in the United States have lately also announced findings that the disease is getting weaker. One of them, Donald Yealy—the chair of emergency medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center—claims that “some patterns [of COVID-19] suggest the potency is diminished.”

“The virus may be changing,” he said earlier this week, adding that fewer people in the Pittsburgh area are contracting the disease, and the infections themselves appear weaker.

Maria Van Kerkhove, an epidemiologist with the World Health Organization, told media after Yealy’s remarks that neither the virus’s transmissibility nor its severity have diminished as Yealy claimed. Yet several other American scientists, including some at Arizona State University, announced findings in May that could bolster claims that the virus is less deadly than it once was.

The scientists at ASU said that they had detected a gene deletion in one sample from several hundred Arizona patients that potentially reduced the fitness of the disease. Notably, they claimed it was similar to a deleted sequence observed in the 2003 SARS virus that was observed near the end of that disease’s epidemic—possibly signaling that COVID-19 may be bound for a similar fate.

Those conclusions were echoed by scientists in Spain this week, who proposed that COVID-19 may have adopted what the researchers call a “don’t burn down the house” strategy, “reducing the severity of the infection and tissue damage without losing transmission capability.” In effect, the disease could be opting to become less lethal so that it can spread more easily—a hallmark of evolutionary behavior, and also a boon for anyone who gets infected with the milder strain.

Data do appear to indicate that the virus may be losing its edge. The statistics website Worldometers, for instance, shows an unmistakably lopsided trend: Though the number of confirmed global cases has been increasing since the start of the pandemic, the number of global deaths has been trending downward since mid-April.

If that pattern holds, it may point to the conclusion that these few skeptical doctors are correct: That the coronavirus, like SARS before it, will eventually burn

out in part due to its own viral mechanisms, without the need for a vaccine or for lockdown measures that have slowed the global economy.

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