**As China's new coronavirus spreads, fear travels even faster**

Inflamed by past scares and Hollywood disaster blockbusters, few things feed collective panic like a virus, experts said Thursday, as China locked down the epicenter of a deadly flu-like outbreak. Health specialists explained why this is the case and what can be done to limit the spread of worry.

“There is an innate sense of fear around disease outbreaks, principally because it is an invisible enemy to the human eye,” said Adam Kamradt-Scott, an expert in the spread and control of infectious diseases at the University of Sydney. “This generates a level of fear, as no one can really know if they have been infected until symptoms develop, by which time it may be too late.”

Unlike bacterial infections, which can be treated by antibiotics, viruses respond to very few treatments, according to Sanjaya Senanayake, associate professor of medicine at The Australian National University. “Also, respiratory viruses, such as influenza, seem to spread more easily from person to person than bacterial infections and therefore have a higher outbreak potential,” she said.

The deadly outbreak began in China, and new cases have been reported in several Asian countries — including Japan — and the United States. Science historian Laurent-Henri Vignaud said popular culture plays an underappreciated role in conditioning populations to fear pandemics. “It’s like in horror films where those infected become zombies,” he said. “It’s extremely unsettling because it calls into question the social bond. We come to fear the sick.”

The main driver of anxiety over the new strain of virus is likely to be its similarity to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), a viral lung infection that killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002 and 2003. The Chinese government took months to report SARS and initially denied World Health Organization experts any access. This time Beijing has locked down some 20 million people in several cities, closing roads and suspending rail and flight routes to contain the virus.

In Wuhan, the center of the outbreak, a taxi driver said: “This year we have a very scary Chinese New Year. People are not going outside because of the virus.” Still, he said he was not concerned about potential food shortages in a prolonged shutdown. “It’s Chinese New Year and people have already bought a lot of things to cook at home for several days,” he said. But the pathogen, known by its technical name of 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), has caused nationwide alarm, with surgical masks selling out at many outlets in Shanghai, Beijing and other cities.

Tom Solomon, a professor at the University of Liverpool, warned that quarantine could be “counterproductive.” “It can increase the level of panic and just cause people to flee by other means,” he said. It is necessary to limit not only the spread of the virus, but also the fear it provokes, according to Rania MacIntyre, head of the Biosecurity Research Program at the Kirby Institute at the University of New South Wales. “Health authorities need to find the balance between providing transparent information to the community without causing panic,” she said.

Kamradt-Scott said it is incumbent on authorities to effectively “counter conspiracy theories and rumors.” Communication by authorities was poor during the last global pandemic scare, of avian flu in 2009, said Vignaud. “The World Health Organization went straight away to the maximum alert level,” thus causing panic, he said. The modern-day fear of a pandemic — a truly global killer — stems from globalization, according to Vignaud. “The good side of it is you can take a plane and in a few hours time be anywhere on the planet,” he said. “The flip side is that the virus can now travel with you.”

“The media has a crucial responsibility to ensure that only accurate, factual information is reported, and needs to refrain as much as possible from speculation and hyperbole in these types of events,” said Kamradt-Scott. But the nature of 24-hour news cycles could nevertheless stoke fears with blanket coverage of what ultimately has only affected a few hundred people worldwide thus far, according to Senanayake. “They need to keep reporting it till they feel that the outbreak is under control and no longer newsworthy,” she said. “With this outbreak, because it is in its infancy, I think it is reasonable for the media to keep updating the public as new information comes to light.”