

Zombies. The flesh-eating, brain-hungry monsters that ravenously attack the world until everyone is infected. Could such a frightening science-fiction disaster actually happen?

As far-fetched as it seems, according to what we know from lore and canon, zombie-ism would work the same way as infectious diseases like SARS, Ebola, and the flu: once a person gets infected, they pass it from person to person via close contact.

As with any newly emerging pathogen, the search for a cure would be complicated, since its origins would likely be a mystery.

Scientists believe the risk of such a devastating scenario is growing larger.

People are building homes in new areas, living and working near unknown insects and animals, which can carry new, unknown diseases, increasing the chances of a deadly outbreak that could possibly spread around the world. Such a disease wouldn't adhere to borders or politics. It would require international coordination and decisive action.

All countries are legally bound to survey and monitor for disease within their borders. But many poorer countries simply don't have the infrastructure. And depending on where a zombie case was identified, the reaction could be very slow, allowing ample time for the disease to spread.

A country might even attempt to hide the existence of an outbreak for political or diplomatic reasons, perhaps to avoid disruptions in trade and travel, and try to contain it quietly. But with insufficient attention to the issue and with something as infectious as zombie-ism, a spread might be inevitable and precious time for preparation while the outbreak was still nascent would be lost.

Governments with plans for such an event and first responders at the ready would fare best. But without professionals treating and instructing people how to interact with infected individuals or how to protect themselves, the disease could spread fast.

Amid an outbreak, the WHO would deploy medical staff and attempt to coordinate response efforts, but the WHO doesn't have the funding, staff, or

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resources to take the lead in halting a pandemic. Individual governments would have to mount their own initiatives.

Those countries would likely prioritize border security in their plan, regardless of WHO recommendations or law. They might lock down their borders and enforce travel bans to and from the center of the outbreak. And they might quarantine or isolate both actual and suspected zombies.

NGOs and aid groups would also spring into action, raising funds and sending medical staff to treat people.

With numerous actors on the ground, it might be unclear who's in charge.

Meanwhile, scientists and researchers would try to develop a vaccine or medication to halt the spread of zombies. But this could take months, while zombies continue to bite, infect, and spread.

Ultimately, researchers think that if a zombie plague actually occurred, few would survive. More people in richer countries might make it out alive, but poorer countries would be decimated.

So what can be done now to protect the world from this zombie future—or from another disease that behaves like zombie-ism?

All countries need to develop the basic health infrastructure to identify pandemics when they start. More funding and improved international coordination are needed for stronger investigations into how diseases spread. With increased financial support for research, scientists can prepare vaccines in advance for known diseases with potential to kill. And when a disease strikes, they can create better lab tests to detect who is infected and who is not.

Disparities in global health must also be addressed. Poorer countries need stronger health systems and better preparation.

Richer countries like the U.S. also have lots of room for improvement. No city in the U.S. currently has the capacity to treat more than a small number of patients infected with dangerous emerging diseases. An outbreak that infects just fifty people would likely overwhelm any American city.

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We won't be able to stop every new disease. But there are things the world can do to make sure it's far more resilient and ready for the zombie apocalypse—or any other pandemic like it.