

# Coronavirus: How many cases will India see? Here's one expert's best-case prediction

*India is currently battling a growing outbreak of the new coronavirus disease, Covid-19. By how much will the caseload grow in the weeks to come? Here's what one expert says.*

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- India cases soar above 270; 4 dead
- Expert says millions could be infected
- Urges containment measures like social distancing

India is currently reporting over 270 cases of the new coronavirus disease, known as Covid-19. But just how high could that number go?

Applying mathematical models used in the US or UK to India points to a possible 300 million (30 crore) cases, according to Ramanan Laxminarayan, director of the Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy (CDDEP)\*.

Is there a best-case scenario? "200 million," Laxminarayan said in an interview with India Today TV's Rahul Kanwal (video below).

But conditions apply: this can only happen if we adopt precautionary measures -- such as coughing into our elbows instead of our hands -- and social distancing (more on that soon).

"Then we're looking at a scale of a problem that India can actually handle, given the infrastructure that we have," Laxminarayan said.

## COVID-19: HOW MANY SEVERE INFECTIONS?

300 million is not an unprecedented caseload -- Ramanan Laxminarayan points out that diseases like influenza already infect that many Indians every year.

However, Covid-19 is different from the flu in two important ways.

"One is that we have zero immunity to this particular coronavirus. So it will spread very rapidly and quite extensively," said Ramanan Laxminarayan.

"The second is, of course, the mortality rate, which is why we're all very concerned."

Laxminarayan pointed out that most of the 300 million infections would be mild. But ten million will be severe -- still not a problem for India to handle, he said, if they occur over the course of a year.

"The problem here is that the ten million severe infections will all happen within a two or three-week window, and will require a lot of intensive care -- and we don't have the systems to handle that much in a short period of time."

That's where social distancing can help.

### **WHY SOCIAL DISTANCING IS IMPORTANT**

Social distancing is essentially the practice of reducing your proximity to other people to reduce the risk of transmission -- including by standing at least a metre away from them, not stepping out of your home unless absolutely necessary, and avoiding crowds.

Much of what you're seeing government authorities do -- shutting down establishments, imposing prohibitory orders, encouraging firms to let staff work from home -- is based on this principle.

The idea is to spread out the infection peak, Ramanan Laxminarayan said. "It's very important for everyone to take this distancing thing very seriously."

"If you value the life of the elderly in this country, please do it."

Senior citizens and people with pre-existing medical conditions like heart disease are at greater risk for serious disease. In his special address to the nation this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi specifically asked people aged above 60 to stay home.

### **HOW MANY DEATHS ARE WE LOOKING AT?**

It depends.

If India's health system is unprepared, we could be looking at 2 to 2.5 million, Ramanan Laxminarayan said.

"If we're prepared, it will come under a million deaths." -- all senior citizens aged over 60, he added.

And preparing, he explained, includes having more hospital beds "in special locations" and getting more ventilators.

"So we have some serious work ahead of us in the next couple of weeks."

**\*NOTE:** CDDEP is a public health research group based in Washington D.C. and New Delhi.