Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). As of now, researchers know that the new coronavirus is spread through droplets released into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The droplets generally do not travel more than a few feet, and they fall to the ground or onto surfaces in a few seconds - this is why social and physical distancing is effective in preventing the spread.

COVID-19 appeared in Wuhan, a city in China, in December 2019. Although health officials are still tracing the exact source of this new coronavirus, early hypotheses thought it may be linked to a seafood market in Wuhan, China. Some people who visited the market developed viral pneumonia caused by the new coronavirus. A study that came out on Jan. 25, 2020, notes that the individual with the first reported case became ill on Dec. 1, 2019, and had no link to the seafood market.

Investigations are ongoing as to how this virus originated and spread. At the end of December, public health officials from China informed the World Health Organization that they had a problem: an unknown, new virus was causing pneumonia-like illness in the city of Wuhan. They quickly determined that it was a coronavirus and that it was rapidly spreading through and outside of Wuhan.

Scientists think this new virus first became capable of jumping to humans at the beginning of December. It originally seemed like the virus first infected people at a seafood market in Wuhan and spread from there. But one analysis of early cases of the illness, published January 24th, found that the first patient to get sick did not have any contact with the market. Experts are still trying to trace the outbreak back to its source.

The type of animal the virus originated from is not clear, although one analysis found that the genetic sequence of the new virus is 96 percent identical to one coronavirus found in bats. Both SARS and MERS originated in bats.

The virus is now spreading all over the world. Although it originated in China, the country took aggressive action at the start of the outbreak, shutting down transportation in some cities and suspending public gatherings. Officials isolated sick people and aggressively tracked their contacts, and had a dedicated network of hospitals to test for the virus.

Now, the epicenter of the pandemic is in the US, which has more cases than any country in the world. New York City has the highest number of cases in the country. Previous US hot spots included a nursing home in Washington state, New Rochelle, New York, and the Boston area, where disease spread at a conference.

The WHO named the illness caused by the coronavirus COVID-19 - “co” and “vi” for coronavirus, “d” for disease, and “19” for the year when the disease emerged.

COVID-19 is a serious illness, and it’s more dangerous than the flu. One CDC projection suggests that between 160 to 214 million people will be infected in the US, and that between 200,000 and 1.7 million could die. That doesn’t take into account actions taken to slow down the outbreak, though.

Confirmed cases of COVID-19 have now hit nearly 2.5 million globally. Businesses are coping with lost revenue and disrupted supply chains as factory shutdowns and quarantine measures spread across the globe, restricting movement and commerce. Unemployment is skyrocketing, while policymakers across countries race to implement fiscal and monetary measures to alleviate the financial burden on citizens and shore up economies under severe strain.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on 9 April said the coronavirus pandemic had instigated an economic downturn the likes of which the world has not experienced since the Great Depression.

Some Conspiracy Theories That Have Emerged From The Outbreak.

* Is Coronavirus A Bioweapon?

The Internet was brimming with conspiracies about the coronavirus, and, perhaps, one of the most prominent ones was that the virus could be a bioweapon. According to an ET Prime report, a group of Chinese scientists in Canada were accused of spying and were stripped of their access to Canada’s National Microbiology Lab (NML) which is known to work on some of the most deadly pathogens.

The alleged ‘policy breach’, highlighted the bioweapon program of other countries including China. Dr Francis Boyle, the creator of Bio Weapons Act, also claims that ‘the coronavirus is an offensive biological warfare weapon with DNA-genetic engineering’.

Again, the claims about coronavirus being a biological weapon are unsubstantiated.

* Origins in the seafood market?

Scientists haven’t been able to determine the origin of COVID-19 but speculations are rife that the virus originated in the seafood market. This was substantiated by reports from Chinese health authorities and the World Health Organization which said that “most” cases had links to the seafood market, which was closed on 1 January.

Sceptics on the online forums, however, have been sharing suspicions that the virus could have originated from Wuhan, Institute of Virology, which houses China’s only level- four biosafety laboratory (the highest-level classification of labs that study the deadliest viruses).

The first prominent personality to come out publicly and support the theory was the US senator Tom Cotton who appeared on Fox News to allege that the virus could indeed have originated from the lab.

Several citizens have also been alleging that this was an attempt to control the Chinese population. However, the claims are unsubstantiated.

* The ‘5G’ Connection

As conspiracy theories started spreading like wildfire on the Internet, several misguided rumours about the connection between 5G and coronavirus surfaced online. COVID-19, is believed to have originated from a wet market in Wuhan, China, in November. Coincidentally, China also turned on some of its 5G networks in November.

Rumours gained steam when Keri Hilson, popular American singer, with 4.2 million followers on Twitter, sent out tweets last week about the alleged connection between 5G and COVID-19, writing, “People have been trying to warn us about 5G for YEARS. Petitions, organizations, studies... what we’re going through is the affects [sic] of radiation. 5G launched in CHINA. Nov 1, 2019. People dropped dead.”

Several conspiracy theorists also alleged that the viral videos of people ‘dropping on the ground and fainting’ in China, were a result of 5G radio waves messing with the oxygen levels in blood of the general public.

Soon, a UK based fact checking website, FullFact, debunked the claims and argued that there is ‘no evidence that 5G is harmful to people’s health’.

The coronavirus is throttling the global economy. In a matter of weeks, the highly contagious disease has pushed the world to the brink of a recession more severe than the 2008 financial crisis. The depth and duration of the downturn will depend on many factors, including the behaviour of the virus itself, public health responses, and economic interventions.

Given the extraordinary nature of the pandemic-induced crisis, fiscal and monetary policymakers are working without a playbook. Many, however, are already moving forward with stunning bailouts that could collectively top $10 trillion.

How bad will the recession be?

Readings in early April suggested the global economy was sailing into colossal storm. “We anticipate the worst economic fallout since the Great Depression,” said Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Meanwhile, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said its indicators produced the strongest warning on record that most major economies had entered a “sharp slowdown.” The World Trade Organization, for its part, forecast that nearly all regions of the world would suffer double-digit declines in trade this year, with North American and Asian exporters hit hardest.

Many governments have effectively frozen social and economic activity in all or parts of their countries to contain the outbreak, shuttering nonessential businesses and ordering residents to stay at home for weeks or months. Billions of people worldwide remain under some type of lockdown. Major industries, especially airlines and other travel-related sectors, are on the brink of bankruptcy. The hope is that economies can power down without causing extreme disruptions, such as widespread business failures or joblessness, and then quickly get back up to speed after the pandemic abates.

Just how quickly governments should unshackle their economies is a matter of debate. In late March, U.S. President Donald J. Trump stirred controversy by saying he would like to start doing so in the United States by Easter on April 12. However, amid a rapidly mounting death toll from the coronavirus, his administration later extended its social-distancing guidance through April. Some Asian and European governments that feel they’ve contained the virus have begun to slowly reopen their economies, but new outbreaks have already caused some to reimpose restraints.

How Are Countries Responding to the Economic Crisis?

A pedestrian wearing a protective face mask amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is reflected on a screen displaying stock prices outside a brokerage in Tokyo, Japan, on March 17, 2020.

The coronavirus pandemic is slowing global commerce to a crawl, but many of the world’s largest economies are taking extraordinary actions to propel them through the crisis.

In the meantime, many world powers are moving mountains to prop up their economies during the coronavirus downturn.

* China

The world’s second-largest economy was stirring back to life in early April after suffering a withering blow from the coronavirus, which originated in the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province in late 2019. Several weeks of government-imposed lockdowns on dozens of cities led to double-digit percentage declines in factory output, retail sales, construction, and other economic activity. Urban unemployment reached a record high of more than 6 percent in February. China’s leadership seems less inclined to spearhead a global economic recovery this time than it did following the 2008 financial crisis, when it spent liberally on a stimulus package of more than a half trillion dollars. In the years since, China has roughly doubled its government debt—to about 60 percent of gross domestic product (GDP)—and many analysts think it cannot afford to spend so aggressively again.

* Germany

The German economy is expected to shrink for the first time since 2009, anywhere from 3 to 10 percent this year depending on the length of the country’s lockdown. In March, nearly a half million German companies applied to have their employees join a short-term government work program intended to prevent mass layoffs. To counter the economic fallout from the coronavirus, Berlin is taking bold actions, abandoning its steadfast commitment to balanced budgets, known as schwarze Null or “black zero.” It is allocating at least 350 billion euros—or about 10 percent of its GDP—to prop up the eurozone’s largest economy. Funds will be spent to bail out struggling businesses, including by making unlimited loans and potentially taking equity stakes. “We’re doing whatever is necessary,” said Chancellor Angela Merkel, who also led the country through the 2008 crisis. “And we won’t be asking every day what it means for our deficit.” Officials note that Germany is poised to spend aggressively because the government has kept its finances in check in recent years, reducing its debt-to-GDP ratio from more than 80 percent in 2010 to below 60 percent today.

* Japan

Economists predict that Japan’s export-driven economy will shrink by around 3 percent this year, which would be its worst performance since 2008. The deep impact from the pandemic comes on the heels of an economic slowdown from a sales tax hike last fall. The virus has also forced the government to postpone the Summer Olympics until next year.  Like some of its peers in the West, the Japanese government has responded with a massive relief package, worth nearly $1 trillion, to help the country through one of its most challenging periods in recent memory. The headline figure is equal to about 20 percent of Japan’s GDP, but analysts say the actual spending impact will be much smaller. “It is no exaggeration to say that Japan’s economy, and the world economy, is facing the biggest crisis since [World War II] right now. We will protect employment and life at all costs,” said Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Bailout measures include cash payments to citizens and small and midsize businesses, interest-free loans, delayed tax payments, and travel and tourism coupons. Amid market volatility in mid-March, Japan’s central bank announced it would double to more than $100 billion its annual purchase of stocks, bonds, and other assets. However, some critics say the move demonstrated the Bank of Japan’s limited options after having kept interest rates next to zero for years.

* United Kingdom

The pandemic is paralyzing the British economy just as its leaders are negotiating a post-Brexit relationship with the European Union. Prior to the outbreak, there were already concerns about a recession from a so-called hard Brexit. Economists say that the coronavirus pandemic could take a 5 to 10 percent slice out of the economy in 2020. The government is prepared to make interventions that would be “unprecedented in the history of the British state” to support the economy, finance minister Rishi Sunak said in early March. Among its emergency measures, the Treasury has pledged to pay 80 percent of workers’ salaries for several months to keep companies from resorting to huge layoffs; offered to reimburse self-employed workers for lost wages; deferred tax payments; increased unemployment benefits; established a loan program for small and midsize companies; and provided rescue aid to charities. The Bank of England has dropped its benchmark interest rate to 0.5 percent, a record low, and loosened capital requirements for banks. In an extraordinary move in early April, the central bank agreed to directly finance the government’s spending during the crisis, freeing it from having to issue debt in the bond market. All told, the rescue efforts could see Britain spend upward of 400 billion pounds, or about 15 percent of GDP.

* United States

In a sign of the staggering toll the virus was taking on the U.S. economy, some 17 million Americans have filed for unemployment since mid-March. Before this crisis, the highest number of filings in a single week was 695,000 in 1982. Some analysts suggest that the U.S. unemployment rate could reach as high as 40 percent in the second quarter of the year, significantly higher than its peak of 25 percent during the Great Depression.  While Washington has been criticized for mismanaging the public health response to the pandemic, it’s also been credited with moving decisively to stabilize financial markets. In March, the Federal Reserve indicated that it will do anything within its power to support the economy and provide liquidity. Among the Fed’s historic actions have been: cutting interest rates close to zero, reducing bank reserve requirements to zero, rapidly purchasing hundreds of billions of dollars in Treasury bonds and mortgage-backed securities, buying corporate and municipal debt, and extending emergency credit to nonbanks.