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Virus no worse than flu by mid-2022: Bill Gates

Emma Connors *South-east Asia correspondent*



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Singapore | COVID-19 will likely kill no more people than the flu by the middle of next year, according to Bill Gates, the billionaire philanthropist and co-founder of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

“Between natural immunity, vaccine immunity and new oral treatments, the death rate and disease rates ought to be coming down pretty dramatically,” Mr Gates told the Bloomberg New Economy Forum in Singapore.



"It's killed millions and cost trillions," Bill Gates on COVID-19. **Bloomberg**

By the end of this week, there will have been more than 255 million cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, and 5.1 million deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

While the [Asia-Pacific region is opening up](#), and numbers of new cases are a fraction of what they were earlier this year, various European countries are struggling with rising infections accompanying the onset of colder weather. Mr Gates suggested the turning point would be the next northern summer.

He said vaccine supply issues "will be largely solved" by the middle of next year. Pharmaceutical companies Merck and Pfizer have both developed oral treatments and "we've been able to reformulate the Merck drug so it will cost less than \$US8 (\$11)".

This means that if someone with underlying conditions or who is otherwise vulnerable catches COVID-19, they will be able to begin “presumptive treatment” as soon as they test positive.

“So between natural immunity, vaccine immunity and these oral treatments that can scale up in a way that the antibodies never did, the death rate and the disease rate, by next summer, ought to be coming down to lower than the average flu season.” At that point, economic activity should be able to resume “in full”.

This assumes there is no new variant of the virus that makes either vaccines or treatment less effective. While this cannot be ruled out, “the evidence suggests it’s not likely,” Mr Gates said.

Meanwhile, the Gates Foundation has begun lobbying wealthy nations to start preparing for the next pandemic. The recommended steps include installing “several thousand” people at the World Health Organisation who are dedicated to stopping infectious diseases.

Every country has to upgrade its diagnostic ability so it is “10 times faster than Australia’s” was at the start of the pandemic – “which was one of the best,” Mr Gates said.

Add in building up the science around vaccinations and treatments, and a global surveillance system, and the cost will be in the “tens of billions of dollars”. That would be a tiny fraction of the price the world has paid for the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Over the next year we will keep reminding people that this has cost trillions and killed millions,” Mr Gates said.

Another factor that may persuade developed countries of the importance of pandemic preparedness is the impact COVID-19 has had on supply chains, particularly as the delta variant shut down factories and ports across Asia this year.



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These disruptions are why access to vaccines should be regarded as an economic issue, not a charity issue, said John Denton, secretary-general of the International Chamber of Commerce.

Mr Denton was less sanguine about vaccine supply than Mr Gates. “Unless we enable equitable access to vaccines, we will continue to have waves, and we will continue to have economic consequences,” he said.

“What has failed to be understood is the interconnectedness of production lines,” Mr Denton said.

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