

FEATURES

PODCASTS FOR PANDEMIC TIMES

BY ERIKA SCOTT

Are you curious to learn more about infectious diseases as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? Looking for science-related conversation topics for that future social gathering? Or just sick of staring at the same four walls of your bed-living-office room day-in and day-out? Then you've come to the right place. There are so many science-related podcasts out there that it is often difficult to know where to begin. I've listened to a few and have put together a list of some of my favourites so far (including some Canadian content) to get you started. The following podcasts will provide you with some fun science-related facts to help make your work-from-home days a little less boring and socializing in that post-pandemic party a breeze.



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This Podcast Will Kill You

Have you ever wondered what cocktail pairs well with smallpox? Believe it or not, this podcast will answer that, as well as your other cocktail-infectious disease pairing questions. Despite the ominous title, this is a fun i



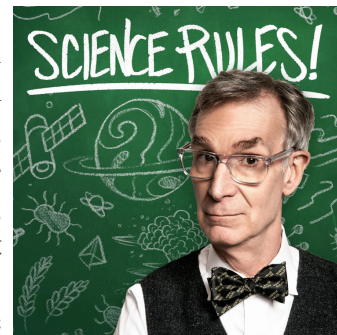
podcast that was started by two disease ecologists and epidemiologists while they were still in graduate school. Erin Walsh and Erin Allmann Updyke begin each episode with a short introduction to the infectious disease that will be the focus of the episode, and then it's "quarantini time" – the two Erins give the name and recipe of their infectious disease-inspired "quarantini" (alcoholic version) and "placeborita" (non-alcoholic version) that the listener can drink while listening to the episode. The rest of the episode typically includes information on the history of the disease by one of the Erins and then a deep dive into its biology by the other Erin. Neither Erin claims to be an expert on most of the topics discussed, but both have a genuine interest in researching and discussing what they know about different infectious diseases. This, in addition to the laid-back and unscripted style, is what makes the podcast easy to listen to; the Erins reportedly don't practice or even know what the other will talk about beforehand so that their conversation is more natural. Infectious diseases covered include influenza, botulism, Lyme disease, and of course, the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, This Podcast Will Kill You started a series called "Anatomy of a Pandemic", in which the Erins discuss the biology of SARS-CoV-2, the COVID-19 disease, epidemiology, vaccines and economic impact of the pandemic.

In the interest of open science, this podcast's website(1) provides links to the sources used to find information on each disease. The website also gives more information about the two hosts, transcripts of each episode, and provides recipes for the "quarantinis" and "placeboritas" featured in each episode – time to start planning that post-pandemic party!

Science Rules! with Bill Nye

Hosted by none other than Bill Nye the Science Guy, along with science writer Corey S. Powell, this podcast is essentially an extension of the old 90s TV show, bowtie and all (at least that's what we're led to believe from the logo). It tackles common scientific



topics such as genetics, evolution, climate change and antibiotic resistance, and aims to make the discussion around those topics readily understandable to the average listener. The style is similar to a radio show where Nye discusses a scientific topic, usually alongside a guest who is an expert in the field, and then takes questions from listeners who either call or write in about that particular topic.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the podcast started a "Coronavirus Edition" series that seeks to answer everything related to the pandemic from the risks associated with grocery shopping to the differences between the vaccines available. Notable experts that have joined Nye on the "Coronavirus Edition" of the podcast include Drs. Francis Collins (director of the USA National Institutes of Health), Anthony Fauci (head of the USA National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases), and Siddhartha Mukherjee (author of *The Emperor of All Maladies* and *The Gene*). Science rules!

Science Vs

The "myth-buster" of science podcasters, Wendy Zukerman, a science journalist, aims to get to the bottom of controversial topics and fads. Ever wondered if you should be taking vitamins and supplements? If vegans are onto something others aren't aware



of? If organic food truly is better for you? These (and other non-food-related) topics are all investigated by Zukerman and her team, and sometimes the answer isn't what you wanted to hear.

Zukerman starts the podcasts by introducing the topic or fad, often in a witty or sarcastic way (complete with lame sound effects), and draws us in with her catchphrase that goes: "when it comes to [insert fad here] there are lots of opinions...but then there's science."

Part of what makes this podcast interesting is that Zukerman doesn't always interview academic or clinical experts. For instance, in the episode about organic food, Zukerman talks to farmers who grow both organic and non-organic food to get their opinions on the farming practices associated with both. She also will occasionally interview consumers or "everyday" people as well. As a result, we often get to hear from both "sides" or from those who have first-hand experience.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Science Vs hosted a "Coronavirus" series. In the same style as the regular episodes, Zukerman works to debunk myths that have arisen during the pandemic, such as those around asymptomatic spread, wearing a mask and vaccine development.

Since each episode often addresses a number of questions about the topic through interviews with a variety of individuals, Zukerman gives a recap at the end of each episode so the listener knows where the scientific evidence falls compared to public opinion. The topics presented in each episode are heavily fact-checked by Zukerman and her team, and all sources used are at the end of the transcripts that can be found in the show notes for each episode on their website(2). So, if you're one of those people who likes to bring up controversial topics at Zoom socials, be sure to give this one a listen.

Minding the Brain

Hosted by Drs. Jim Davies and Kim Hellemans, professors and experts in psychology and neuroscience at Carleton University in Ottawa, this podcast discusses all things brain-related including factors



such as stress and drugs, sleeping and dreaming, brain disorders and mental health. Although they do occasionally interview other experts, this is more of a laid-back conversational podcast between the two hosts. The fact that the hosts draw upon many of their own experiences as professors and researchers makes it understandable and easy to listen to. As this is a neuroscience podcast, the hosts do not discuss the COVID-19 pandemic to the same extent that other podcasts in this list do. However, they do have one important pandemic-focused episode (so far) that discusses the effects of

social isolation on mental health and well-being, what makes people believe in conspiracy theories, and how to encourage compliance to public health restrictions.

The podcast's website(3) provides more information about the hosts and episodes.

The Dose

Another Canadian podcast, The Dose, is hosted by Dr. Brian Goldman, a physician and medical reporter, and is part of the CBC Podcasts network. Similar to Science Rules! with Bill Nye, through short 20-30



interviews with (Canadian) experts, this podcast offers a Canadian take on different scientific topics and aims to break down the science to answer the most pressing questions in a way that is easily understandable to the average listener. As the podcast only began in February 2020, the majority of its episodes are related to COVID-19; these "give you a dose of smart advice" on topics such as the effectiveness of masks, whether it's safe to get takeout food from restaurants, how contact tracing apps work, and let's not forget the topic that has been on all of our minds throughout the pandemic: how to lose the "quarantine 15."

Nature Podcast

If you want to impress all your science friends with your knowledge of the latest research "from astronomy to zoology" published in Nature, this podcast is for you. Essentially a Nature RSS feed for your ears, each



episode of Nature Podcast features a main topic, which is usually a research article published that day, and often includes an interview with one of the authors of the paper. Additional "Research Highlights" are also presented, as well as a discussion of the weekly "Nature Briefing." Although not necessarily geared toward making science understandable to the average listener, the hosts do a good job of breaking down and highlighting the main points of the research articles.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nature Podcast released a weekly “Coronapod” series that gives Nature’s perspective on the latest developments of the pandemic often supported by interviews with experts. Topics covered include the pandemic origin story, COVID-19 antibody treatments and the development of vaccines.

Science Weekly

This is another great podcast if you’re interested to know a little bit of everything. Hosted by science correspondents from The Guardian, this podcast covers a wide variety of topics including quantum mechanics,



gene editing, the psychology around climate change denial, artificial intelligence and many, many others. Through interviews with experts, listeners get to hear about the latest research being conducted on each of these topics.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Science Weekly started a “COVID-19” segment where listeners can send in their questions and the science correspondents will ask these and other pressing questions to experts involved in the response to the pandemic. Relevant topics include why we’re feeling burnt out by the pandemic, how vaccines can be modified to work against new variants, and how space travel and historical events, such as the London blitz, can teach us how to cope in isolation and stress.

Whether you’re just wanting to pass the time or curious to learn new information about the pandemic itself or a variety of other science-related topics, the aforementioned podcasts are both interesting and informative. Through regular updates and interviews with experts, many of these podcasts have shown just how far scientific research has advanced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, from learning more about the virus itself to developing and producing vaccines. As we eagerly look forward to those post-pandemic parties, for now, let’s virtually bond with each other and the podcasters over our shared love of science. To echo Bill Nye: “Now, more than ever, science rules!”

References

1. This Podcast Will Kill You [Internet]. [cited 2021 Mar 10]. Available from: <https://thispodcastwillkillyou.com/>
2. Science Vs [Internet]. Gimlet; [cited 2021 Mar 10]. Available from: <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/science-vs>
3. Minding the Brain [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2021 Mar 10]. Available from: <https://mindingthebrainpodcast.com/>