

Is It Time To Be Worried About Covid-19 Again?

Don't call it a comeback — because it's not, really — but Covid-19 appears to be in the midst of another summer uptick, a reminder that the virus that caused so much economic and social turmoil in the past few years has not been completely eliminated as a public health threat.

It's not a surge. The waves the US experienced with the delta variant and omicron are unlikely to be repeated again, now that so many people have either been vaccinated or infected or both. But wastewater surveillance — which some experts regard as the best measure of Covid activity now that testing is so scattershot — indicates an increase in the virus's prevalence. The concentration of Covid-19 in US wastewater has roughly doubled in the past month, according to Biobot Analytics. It has been the first notable upswing since last winter. Likewise, emergency department diagnoses have ticked up, according to CDC data, another indication of more Covid activity in the community. Thus far, hospitalizations and deaths are still flat.

Because of preexisting immunity and evolutions of the virus itself, most cases should be mild. **Some people may not even realize it's Covid.** Even if immunity from antibodies is waning, which may lead to people feeling sick, immunity in their T cells should help most people avoid getting seriously ill. But some rise in severe disease is expected when the virus is spreading more; it is a statistical inevitability. In Nashville and surrounding middle Tennessee, Dr. William Schaffner, formerly the medical director of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, said his surveillance network's number of hospitalized Covid patients had grown slightly, from the mid-teens to the low 20s, in the past few weeks.

It's the summer travel season, so people are out and about, mingling with others and sharing germs. Most people have also not received a Covid-19 vaccine shot in a while, given the low uptake of the boosters, and so their vaccine-conferred immunity is starting to wane. *"The way I like to characterize it is it's smoldering along,"* Schaffner told me of Covid-19 these days. *"There are many opportunities now for spread to take place. Here and there, there will be little upticks."*

This summer bump is not a crisis. But it is a reminder that, so soon after the US finally reached the point that there were no longer any "excess deaths" that defined the pandemic, Covid-19 is still with us. CDC Director Mandy Cohen told NBC News this week the agency is preparing for another "tri-demic" this winter — with Covid, influenza, and **another respiratory virus, RSV**, circulating widely — that could challenge the US health care system.

How the US can best minimize Covid's damage going forward

We do have the tools to minimize the damage these viruses can do. The challenge has been getting people to take advantage of them. This winter, an **RSV vaccine** will be available **for the first time for people over 60**. A new variation of the Covid-19 vaccine is expected to be ready as well. And then there will be an updated version of the flu shot. Even though most people are no longer wearing masks, people who may be at higher risk because of their age or health may still want to consider doing so if they are indoors around large groups of people.

And then, if people do feel sick, it's still important to take tests. A positive result allows doctors to prescribe the **antiviral Paxlovid** for patients who would benefit from it. At-home testing is the first step toward taking better advantage of Paxlovid, Schaffner said. **If you're feeling sick, take a rapid test.** If it's positive, call your doctor. **If it's negative, take another in the next 24 to 48 hours.** Even if they remain negative, if symptoms worsen, you should still keep your doctor in the loop.