

Heads Up. It's back.

By Michael Fine

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I'm so sorry to be writing again to tell you that Covid is surging again, but that's where we seem to be. So it's time to mask up, stop the bars and restaurants, theaters, and clubs for a while and even rethink airline travel and other public transportation. I feel guilty because I haven't been watching the numbers much, because I, like many of you, got lulled along and thought Covid was in retreat.

It isn't. It's back. We've got a new rapidly spreading variant called XBB1.5, which is now responsible for most Covid infections. It spreads rapidly, but there isn't any evidence that it is any more dangerous than other variants, which is good news, but it is early yet, and XBB1.5 may turn out to be more (or less) dangerous than we think. There's evidence from sanitation systems in communities and on airplanes that Covid is on the rise all over the country. A recent study found SARS-CoV-2 in the wastewater from 96% of commercial plane flights sampled.

Hospitalizations in Rhode Island are up fifty percent since November but appear to have dropped off a little in the last week, although I think that drop may be a red herring, given the data I'm seeing out of one of our densely populated communities, where the test positivity rate is now 30-50 percent. Deaths in Rhode Island peaked in mid-December and then dropped, for a bit, but I'm betting that was the Thanksgiving bump, and the Christmas bump, which is likely causing our current surge, will mean more deaths again over the next three to four weeks.

The number of sick people has tripled in at least one of our densely populated places over the last two months. Those places are the canary in the coal mine, and means it is likely that we have six to eight more weeks of intense spread in Rhode Island as a whole. As a result many of us have gotten or will get sick, and some workplaces and schools may have trouble operating unless they and we act now to stop viral transmission. That means doing what we all know how to do but don't love – masking, avoiding bars and restaurants etc., particularly if you are over 65 or have a weakened immune system -- staying away from stores and airplanes if you don't want to get sick, and isolating for 10-14 days if you do get sick to protect your family and your community. (If everybody was careful, we'd slow the spread and intensity of the spread, not just prevent hospitalization and death, but young people are too often willing to risk illness because their risk of hospitalization and death remain low.)

I'm embarrassed that I fell asleep at the wheel, but even more embarrassed that public health authorities, from CDC and the rest of the federal government, down to state and local departments of health, are minimizing this surge, instead of being forthright and clear, warning people and helping us all stay healthy. That failure is mostly political, as far as I can tell: everyone is afraid of business folks, who want to keep their customers coming through their doors, no one wants to be Debbie Downer, and no one wants to provoke the ire of the antivaxxers and anti-maskers, instead of telling truth to power. That's not political correctness in my view. That's cowardice.

The problem, as with Omicron, is that this surge will infect lots of people, so too many people will end up hospitalized and too many will die, just because so many people are getting infected. Remember, just like last year, a whole new cohort of people have aged and weakened with age, and a whole new cohort has developed weak immune systems. The good news is the number of deaths will likely be lower this year than last year – I'm guessing 100 to 150 over the winter, perhaps a little more, given deaths are in the 3-13 per week range in Rhode Island now, or 35-45 a month. That's terrible but is way better than last winter, when we lost about 500 Rhode Islanders, mostly unnecessarily, because the Governor refused to order masking as appropriate in November of 2021 when the numbers clearly showed a surge was on its way. And got re-elected anyway. Shame on us.

The bad news is that lots of us will get sick again, many unnecessarily. The good news is that those of us who are both vaccinated and have been recently infected

are the most immune of all of us, at least for four to six months. That doesn't mean any of us can or should ignore taking precautions again, because we are all at some risk of getting sick and getting sick is no fun, some of us will end up hospitalized and dying, and I can't tell who is who before it happens. But it does suggest hope for the future.

Viewed this way, Covid is only the *messenger* of illness and death for some. The *message* is that everyone dies of something, that everyone ages and weakens over time, that stress and overcrowding make some of us susceptible to infection – and that our culture is a culture of denial, where we hope for and pretend we have an invincibility that doesn't exist, and where we sometimes value commerce and profit more than we value human life. Much Covid infection and most Covid death is preventable, only we won't do what is necessary to prevent it: vaccination, masking, avoiding restaurants, bars, stores and travel during surges, cocooning the elderly during surges, and test and treatment flying squads for the elderly. The bivalent Covid vaccine was badly under-utilized this fall. Paxlovid treatment is used by the elderly only about 15 percent of the time it is indicated.

Remember. I hate masking too. The damn mask fogs my glasses. But like democracy, which Churchill called the worse form of government, except for all the others, masks are the worst kind of prevention. Except for doing nothing and seeing too many people get sick and some people die.

Now, to my being slow to write this. I stopped paying enough attention for two reasons. The first reason is that our testing process got disemboweled and we switched as a nation, to home testing, so I stopped thinking that the reported testing numbers are reliable (they aren't) – but hospitalizations and deaths, late indicators that risk missing the beginning of a surge, are still useful indicators, once they bump. I also stopped paying attention because of the triple epidemic, the rapid spread of Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and influenza early in the fall, which appeared to slow Covid spread in October and November. I was convinced that these two other viruses would turn on what's called the innate immune system, a little known part of the immune system that helps protect against viruses generally. I was wrong. While that may have helped initially, it's impact doesn't appear to be long lasting; the time-limited nature of that response, plus the failure to get everyone immunized, plus this new cohort of susceptible people plus the new variant looks to have made *deja vue* all over again, although with fewer hospitalizations and deaths *from Covid*. When you add in the hospitalizations and deaths from RSV and flu however, this fall and winter starts to look more like last fall and winter than I'd like.

What does the future hold? I'm betting we've got six to eight weeks of Covid life, with Covid perhaps peaking about the end of the month of January. Then a pretty good spring and summer, but another tough fall and winter next year and every year we travel and eat out as much as we do, with RSV a little less than this year,

plenty of flu and lots of Covid again -- but with a lower overall peak in hospitalizations and death, and with fall-winter hospitalizations and deaths trending downward over a few years, until the next new viral threat comes along.

There are now eight billion people on this earth. Some of us travel incessantly, and seem to think that only bars, restaurants, concerts and theatres give human life meaning. If that is the culture we choose, then this is the kind of pandemic/endemic/viral threat we are choosing to live with, and, for some of us, die from.

There is another way, of course. We could stay home more. Play scrabble with people we love. Consume less. Learn and teach more. Make art. Make music. Make gardens. Plant fruit trees. Build community. Protect one and other and ourselves.

It's a new year. The choice is ours. The virus isn't the problem. We have met the enemy and once again, the enemy is us.

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