

It's Back.

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Ouch. Darn. Sorry. I hate it. It's only 16 days since the I last wrote about Covid, and it's back again? So what gives?

BA.5 is spreading. It's come sooner than I expected and is likely to make more people sick. We don't know yet about hospitalization and deaths, or about how sick it will make us.

I was in a taxi in New York yesterday when I heard the news. The New York City Department of Health is recommending people mask indoors and even outdoors in crowded places.

What gives is this: BA.5 has an R_0 of 18.6 – which means it is about six times more transmissible than the Wuhan virus, and about as transmissible as measles, which is the most transmissible virus most of us know about. That means you can come into a room two hours after an infected person was there and still get infected.

BA.5 is so infectious that it can, in theory, spread outdoors, which is why it is surging in the summer. It is so infectious that it is hitting three months after the last surge, not four months later as we've come to expect. It will come on fast and likely peak the last week in July or the first week in August and then be gone three weeks later. About a third of us may get sick, although some of us may still be protected by the last booster and the last round of infections, but how many and how well-protected is unclear.

What a bummer!

What about virulence? Or, in normal English, how dangerous is it? How sick will it make people? Simple answer: we don't know. In general, we learn about how dangerous each variant was after they blow through. But the hype about some variants being less virulent than another (which was what they said about Omicron) has turned out to be mostly hype after all – all the variants have been pretty much the same, in terms of how dangerous they are. Which means most people get a mild illness – a couple of days of fever cough and fatigue -- but the old and the sick and the unvaccinated sometimes end up in the hospital and sometimes end up dying. So the virus functions like a grim reaper, culling the herd, more or less – except when it doesn't, except when it kills a young person who is in a period of diminished immunity, which can occur to anyone who is stressed or has another recent illness. In Rhode Island, this surge can be expected to kill 25-50 people, like the last one, but again it is hard to predict. (The last surge killed about 47 in April, May and June.) Way too many, but way better than the early surges, before immunization and acquired immunity, when surges killed 500 to 1500.

What to do? You know the drill. Mask up indoors and in crowds, like my friends at the NYC DOH said. It is unlikely the politicians in Rhode Island (who just killed public testing) will let anyone who works for them say that publicly, but again, we the people can do what our politicians are too weak-kneed and cowardly to say and do. We can decide ourselves to mask up. If we do so, we'll probably save the lives of 25 or so of our fellow Rhode Islanders, which to me is a big deal. (Imagine how we've react if some crazed kid with an AK-47 had shot up the Bristol parade and killed 25 people? Let's take the energy that would go into that revulsion and grief but put it to work now by masking -- and save those lives. What an analogy! But this is where we are in the America of 2022.)

Masking isn't forever. Mask for a month to six weeks and then we're probably done for another month or more.

Get your second booster this week if you haven't done so already. Avoid crowds. We are in NYC and after one subway ride and then learning the transmissibility numbers, decided to walk or cab instead of the subway, canceled our planned visits to museums and movies, and kept eating only in outside restaurants (which they

have lots of in NYC – smarter than us, or at least more realistic. They also have testing tents on every street corner, because they actually like their tourist industry, just sayin.)

If you have travel plans, please please please mask in airports and on airplanes, regardless of who is requiring what. You just don't want to get sick in France or Ghana or wherever and end up quarantined in an overpriced hotel for five to ten days. Please use hand sanitizer. You can still pick up the virus from touching a handrail or a counter and then rubbing your eyes, something most of us do every few minutes without noticing that we are doing so. And get travel insurance, so you don't have to pay for that hotel if you do get sick.

And if you aren't vaccinated, please give vaccination one more thought. This is a health thing, not an idea or ideology. The only person you aren't protecting by your choice not to get vaccinated is just yourself. I hate the drug companies, and I hate the fact that so many people have made so much money off this virus and this vaccine. We need to change the US and make health care for people, not for profit, and we need to build a health care system that is for every single person and every single community. That said, the unvaccinated people out there are taking an unnecessary risk for ideas that aren't well founded in science. You are too valuable for us to lose to what is going to look like a mirage, when we see it in the rear-view mirror. Ideas don't matter much. People do.

Be careful. Let's whip this together.

Michael

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