

Another COVID Christmas with the Ominous Omicron variant

This fall, it felt like life was finally returning to some form of normalcy. With so many of us fully vaccinated, we felt safe to visit friends and family. Dining and recreation activities had resumed, and many were planning winter holidays. But even then, COVID was actively circulating amongst the unvaccinated and the unwary. We knew rates would rise as winter moved more activities indoors, but getting more children vaccinated and boosting our elderly should have kept things under control. Now, COVID has, once again, reminded us that until the world is vaccinated, we all remain vulnerable.

While the Omicron variant is, indeed, ominous, you can still keep yourself and others safe. Omicron spreads like wildfire – or like the smoke from a wildfire. It travels through the air at alarming speed and distances. Inside, there is really no safe distance, especially with people you do not live with. Masks, fresh air and high-quality air filters are your best protection. Even outside, you should be wearing masks if you are going to have any close contacts. High quality masks are still readily available, so stock up now. Double masking with a disposable medical mask followed by a well-fitting cloth mask is very effective. If you are high risk or immunocompromised, consider investing in some KN 95 masks for higher risk indoor activities.

Being fully vaccinated will still help protect you from severe disease but is less effective on infection or transmission. Our immune system has many ways of attacking infections. Antibodies are the first and fastest line of defense, giving the others time to build up and get going. Omicron can avoid many of the antibodies created by a previous COVID infection or vaccination, which is why many people who are fully vaccinated are now testing positive. However, it is not able to get by those other defenders. This may be why, most people who are fully vaccinated seem to have milder disease, are much less likely to have severe disease and may recover faster. Boosters are helping increase antibody protection from vaccination or previous infection. But boosters take at least 7-14 days to work, so will not help us through the holiday season this year.

Right now, I am devoting most of my time to trying to get as many people through our local vaccination clinic as possible. We are a small clinic with a small staff but have more than tripled the number of shots we are giving in recent weeks. I have added additional clinics through the holidays where possible. We are running flat out right now and really appreciate everyone's help and patience with this. There are a few things you can do to help us move people through as efficiently as possible. Please bring your appointment confirmation with you just in case we don't have you on our list. If possible, please wear a disposable medical mask without valves and keep your mouth and nose always covered. Dress warmly as you may need to wait outside or near an open door. Our clinic has a good ventilation system, but we cannot take any chances right now. I need to protect everyone working in and coming to this clinic.

I also want to take this opportunity to say how grateful I am, to live in such a caring and supportive community. I am frequently overwhelmed by the kindness, compassion and generosity of the people I meet and work with every day in the clinic. If this pandemic has had any bright side, this would be it. I have had little time for Christmas shopping, so this year, along with other donations, I will be contributing to COVAX and the global vaccination efforts. Maybe this will help make next Christmas a little brighter and safer.