

COVID isn't done with us yet.

COVID-19 – the 2023 edition. New Year and another New Variant

It's a new year, and COVID-19 still refuses to admit defeat as yet another Omicron offshoot is on the rise. What's different, is that, XBB.1.5, the Kraken, is a recombinant. It combines some of the "best" attributes of 2 previous variants, making it better at latching onto and invading human cells and at avoiding antibodies produced by previous infections or vaccination. This lets it multiply rapidly, before the rest of the immune system kicks in. If you haven't had a recent shot or COVID infection, you are much more likely to get sick from a casual contact. Those with weak immune systems who have few or no natural antibodies are at even higher risk, since many of the antibody treatments we have, don't work well against the Kraken.

In the northeastern US, XBB.1.5 cases rose from 4 to 70 %, in only a few weeks. Hospitalizations are also rising quickly. Earlier vaccines and previous COVID infections are less protective against reinfection, but the bivalent boosters seem more effective. Paxlovid and other non-antibody treatments are still effective, but COVID was still killing twice as many people as flu and RSV combined, even before Kraken arrived.

With only 30 % of our local community recently boosted, this variant is likely to spread rapidly once it arrives. Most people have some immunity, protecting us from very severe or fatal infections, but hospitalization rates will rise. Those not boosted since September and with high-risk conditions will most be affected. However, the combination of lower immunity and rapid spread are exactly what COVID needs to learn how to avoid our defences even more effectively. Every COVID infection contributes to the creation of the next version, even if you aren't sick. We now know that this virus can infect almost every system in your body and early data suggests repeat infections are associated with increased problems. Who knows what future versions are going to be able to do.

Avoidance is still the best defence, but this does not mean locking yourself away at home forever. Living successfully with COVID is a matter of keeping your exposures low and your antibodies high. Masks and air filters help keep COVID out of indoor air, regular handwashing helps keep it out of your mouth and nose. If you are sick, stay home! If you are around other people, and can't wear a mask, consider testing. Minimizing the amount of virus you inhale, gives your immune system a fighting chance.

Getting a booster every 6 months also keeps your antibodies topped up and ready to respond quickly. The new bivalent vaccines reduce your chances of getting sick from COVID for about 10 weeks and provide about 95% protection against for severe COVID for about 6 months. Children, 5 to 11 yrs, can now get a bivalent booster, 6 months after their last shot. Children under 5, are still not eligible for boosters, but they don't have to wait before getting other vaccinations. Vaccination clinics at the Picton arena run Tuesdays, from 1 to 7 pm. Appointments are strongly encouraged and can now be booked on-line a minimum of 3 months after your last shot.

My crystal ball remains cloudy, but we may only have about 4 weeks to try to head off this next wave. We know what we need to do, and now is the time to do it. Masks help people keep their germs to themselves, making indoors safer everyone. Consider it a Random Act of Kindness!

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