

Why We May See a Spike in Cases This Summer

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The pandemic is not over.

It might look like it is since almost all public health guidelines have been lifted, including wearing a mask in most settings.* Not to mention the province's case counts are lower than reality due to changes in data collection and COVID-19 numbers only being monitored for certain settings and populations.* Overall, there have been much fewer news stories about COVID-19, which makes the risk of infection seem like a thing of the past. But it is not.

Why are we still at risk?

According to Canada's top doctors, Canada is seeing a recent increase in the BA.2.12.1, BA.4, and BA.5 sub-variants of the Omicron variant.* These sub-variants have been driving new outbreaks in the United States and across Europe.*

“It is possible that there could be a resurgence here in Canada over the next weeks” according to Dr. Howard Njoo, the Public Health Agency of Canada's deputy chief health officer.*

As of May 22, the percentage of BA.4 and BA.5 COVID-19 cases in Canada was 7.6% compared to just 2.1% the week before.* Meanwhile, 27.8% of all COVID-19 variant cases in Canada were the BA.2.12.1 sub-variant.*

Last Friday, Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, commented on the rise in cases driven by these variants within Canada.* “Factors such as viral evolution and waning immunity are anticipated to impact COVID-19 activity moving forward,” she stated.*

By “viral evolution”, Dr. Tam is referring to the new variants and sub-variants. She also said that BA.2.12, BA.4, and BA.5 Omicron sub-variants are more resistant to vaccines.* By “waning immunity”, Dr. Tam is referring to the fact that vaccines in general do not offer the same degree of protection after a significant amount of time passes.* This is why we get a flu shot each year. Even if the virus wasn't mutating as often as COVID-19 is, our risk of infection would still be increasing with time.

I had Omicron a while ago. Aren't I protected?

According to a new research study from China, people who were infected with the earliest version of the Omicron variant (BA.1) can still get infected with later versions of Omicron even if they have been vaccinated and boosted.*

Vaccinated patients who got the original Omicron variant (BA.1) as a breakthrough case developed antibodies that could neutralize that virus plus the original COVID-19 virus.*

However, the Omicron sub-variants that are circulating now (BA.2.12.1, BA.4, and BA.5) have mutations that allow these viruses to get through those antibodies.*

Are they going to create a new vaccine for these sub-variants?

Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna are both developing boosters based on the original Omicron variant (BA.1).* The researchers from this same study warned that these boosters “may not achieve broad-spectrum protection against new Omicron variants.”*

Previous research, from another study which has not yet been officially validated by other researchers, suggested that unvaccinated people infected with Omicron are unlikely to develop immune responses that will protect them against other variants of the coronavirus.*

The recent study’s experiments showed that the antibody drugs bebtelovimab (from Eli Lilly) and cilgavimab (a component of AstraZeneca’s Evusheld) can still effectively neutralize BA.2.12.1 and BA.4/BA.5.*

What can we do to protect ourselves?

Even though these new strains have demonstrated an ability to evade immunity, Dr. Njoo emphasizes the importance of keeping up to date with COVID-19 vaccines.* He commented that, even if the vaccines don’t prevent infection, they have been proven to reduce incidents of severe illness, hospitalization or death from the virus.*

Dr. Onyema Ogbuagu, an infectious diseases researcher at the Yale School of Medicine, stated:

“My personal bias is that while there may be some advantage to having an Omicron-specific vaccine, I think it will be of marginal benefit over staying current with the existing vaccines and boosters. If you’re due for a booster, get a booster. What we’ve learned clinically is that it’s most important to stay up-to-date with vaccines” to maintain high levels of COVID-19 antibodies circulating in the blood.*

Final Thoughts

We are understandably desperate to put the pandemic behind us, but we shouldn’t pretend that we aren’t still at risk of infection. With the lifting of health restrictions, getting boosted may seem irrelevant, but the protection it offers is still needed. If you are inspired to find a nearby clinic, you can find information about clinics in Toronto our weekly updates.

There is no need to live in fear, but we have to remain vigilant that there may be a spike in COVID-19 cases this summer unlike the past two summers.

If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675