

As COVID rules ease, common colds rebound across America

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Infectious disease expert Ravina Kullar's husband has a cold. So does her

sister-in-law.

Meanwhile, the Cleveland Clinic's waiting rooms are becoming much more frequented by folks with coughs, sneezes and sniffles, said family medicine physician Dr. Neha Vyas.

These folks are part of a nationwide trend occurring as COVID-19 vaccinations rise, masks drop, protective restrictions lift, and life returns to some semblance of normal, experts say.

"Face masks have protected us not only from COVID-19 infection, but also other respiratory infections such as colds, the flu," said Kullar, a consultant with Expert Stewardship Inc., a California company that promotes infection prevention in long-term care facilities. "People now are more susceptible to catching these respiratory viruses that someone acquires through the nasal passage or the mouth. It's right on par with lifting the restrictions."

Earlier this month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an advisory warning that one of these bugs—[respiratory syncytial virus](#) (RSV)—has been on the rise in 13 states, mostly in the South.

At the same time, there's been a strong uptick in sales of over-the-counter cold and flu medications, according to Catalina Marketing Corp., a company that tracks store purchases across the United States.

Among cough and cold remedies, there's been a 564% increase for kids' products and an 80% bump in medications aimed at adults compared to this time in 2019 and 2020, Catalina's data shows.

There's also been a 151% increase in vaporizer purchases, a 78% increase in chest rubs, a 48% increase in throat drops and a 19% increase in allergy or sinus remedies.

More people are also hitting the doctor's offices with cold symptoms.

For example, the Cleveland Clinic has had a noticeable uptick in patients with respiratory infections and sinus infections, Vyas said.

"There are correlations between the fact we are opening up places and dropping mask mandates and interacting more and going to sporting events and going back to the gym, and the rise we are seeing in respiratory illnesses," she said.

No cold/flu season last year

The fact of the matter is that masks and social distancing protected Americans from a lot more than COVID-19 during the pandemic, experts said.

Winter seasonal viruses—the flu, the common cold and the like—fell by more than 99% last year as Americans adopted practical measures to protect themselves against COVID, according to a University of Wisconsin study published June 21 in *JAMA Network Open*.

Essentially, the United States did not have a cold and flu season last year, researchers said. Cases in Wisconsin fell from an average 4,800 per month in previous seasons to an average 12 per month during the pandemic.

The fact that masks are coming off during the summer shouldn't be any safer than if they came off during the winter's cold and flu doldrums, said Dr. Stacey Rose, an assistant professor of infectious diseases at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

"There are plenty of viruses, including the common cold, that continue to circulate during the summer months," Rose said. "Enteroviruses are

classically spread in the summer months, and coronaviruses are year-round viruses. RSV can definitely be seen in the spring. Even influenza, which we used to think of as a strictly 'winter' virus, I think we've seen a lot more in the spring over the last few years."

A certain amount of infection risk comes from resuming "normal" life, which includes interacting with others in cramped locations.

"People are traveling so much more," Kullar said. "I flew to LAX, and I've never seen that airport so packed, even in pre-pandemic days."

Adding to the risk, many seem to be taking a break from the entire suite of protective measures that became instilled in us during the pandemic, Vyas said.

"I've noticed even in my office those very strict hand-washing and hand hygiene and social distancing measures that we took a year ago are really not being as followed as much," she said.

Stick with routine hygiene

In addition, kids are returning to child-care centers that are major vectors of viral spread and were shut down during the pandemic.

"Those of us who have [young kids](#) know that when we first enroll our kids in day care settings they tend to get sick a lot and they bring things home, and I think that all was reduced during COVID-19," Rose said.

If you want to avoid getting a cold, then you should consider tightening up your personal protections against infection, Vyas said.

Medical professionals "try to clean high-touch surfaces all the time. We wash our hands all the time. We avoid sneezing or coughing into our

hands all the time," Vyas said. "Those are the things that should never be dropped. Those are just basic hygiene measures."

And even though many now have the freedom to doff their masks in a variety of public places, Rose said they might want to think twice before tossing them away.

"It is pretty remarkable how effective these [masks](#) are at preventing the spread not just of COVID-19 but of these other viruses and infectious particles," she said. "If we were to get into a situation where we found that influenza was spiking or RSV was spiking and we wanted to put a stop to that, from a public health perspective, don't throw away that mask."

For her part, Vyas thinks she'll continue to wear a mask in crowded situations.

"I don't know how comfortable I would be without wearing a mask now in public transportation," Vyas said. "If I'm in a situation where I'm around a lot of other people, it may make sense to maintain that social distancing, to try not to touch high-touch surfaces, to stay away from buffets, to do all of those things we were doing before—not just to limit the spread of COVID, but for [respiratory viruses](#) in general."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [respiratory syncytial virus \(RSV\)](#).

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