

'COVID parties' spread the virus on purpose. That's 'Russian roulette,' doctors warn

January 25 2022, by Lisa Gutierrez



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Thinking about intentionally exposing yourself to the coronavirus?

Thinking that you'll probably get away with a mild case and become

immune to COVID-19?

You need to think again. Even if you're fully vaccinated.

If you get COVID on purpose, there's no guarantee you'll only get a little sick, though the contagious omicron variant surging now is less likely to put you in the hospital than the previous delta variant.

"The majority of people that get omicron that are vaccinated really do have minor symptoms," said Dr. Marc Larsen, an [emergency physician](#) at Saint Luke's Hospital of Kansas City. "It's still playing Russian roulette though. If you get a really severe case, you can't take it back."

And yet, the idea that omicron isn't as deadly as other variants, or doesn't cause severe illness in children, seems to be motivating recent social media chatter about so-called "COVID parties" across the country. They're like the "chickenpox parties" of old where parents exposed unvaccinated children to other [sick children](#) so they wouldn't get it as adults when consequences are more severe.

That's a no-no, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says.

A few days ago, doctors in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley cautioned parents against COVID parties.

This month, Dr. Craig Bunnell, chief medical officer for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, appeared in a video on the hospital's YouTube channel offering similar advice.

"COVID is not a cold. It's a life-threatening disease and people are still dying from it," Bunnell said. "For those who don't actually die, many will be sick for a long time."

"Remember, getting infected with delta didn't have much preventive benefit from getting infected from omicron. So it doesn't mean you'll be protected from the next variant."

Last week, Hanka Horká, a popular Czech folk singer, died after she deliberately got infected with the coronavirus. In the Czech Republic, proof of vaccination or recovery from infection is needed to enter restaurants and entertainment venues.

"Her philosophy was that she was more OK with the idea of catching COVID than getting vaccinated," her son told the BBC.

If you need another deterrent, you might want to see what's happening in Larsen's ER at Saint Luke's, where he is a member of the COVID-19 Response Team.

Think about ERs you've seen on TV. Staff in scrubs hustling about, machines beeping, a couple of police officers there too, because they've brought in a patient in custody.

Now add in waves of people coming in sick with COVID-19.

And the staff taking care of them are gowned up and wearing face shields so they don't get infected. And managers are making sure there are enough people working each shift because so many employees are out sick with COVID.

And every [emergency department](#) in the city is on "high volume" status because of the coronavirus.

And the COVID cases keep coming.

That's real life now.

Saint Luke's allowed a reporter and photographer from The Star into the hospital off the Country Club Plaza one afternoon last week to see the fallout of the COVID surge.

"It seems like every day is the same as the previous day. It's Groundhog Day in the emergency department, and really health care," Larsen said. "We've been doing this really since March 2020 and it's been a long couple of years.

"And every time we come to work we think maybe we're going to be past it, maybe today will be a slower day. And every day seems to be kind of the same.

"It's so frustrating. We see the same thing over and over. And people are sick and sick and sick."

So the idea that people would intentionally expose themselves to COVID makes Larsen adamant.

"I still encourage everybody to avoid getting it and to do everything they can to avoid it right now."

Every emergency department in the Saint Luke's system—there are 16 hospitals—has been boarding patients for the last one to two weeks, Larsen said. That happens when there are no hospital beds upstairs for patients who need to be admitted from the ER.

Lately some patients have been waiting in beds in hallways or in chairs that convert to beds, whatever can be pressed into service, Larsen said. "But it's exhausting. And we just need everybody to understand where we are right now," he said.

Some of that backup is caused by COVID patients staying longer in

intensive care. "They stay in that ICU for 27 days on average right now," Larsen said. "There's a lot of patients that are exceedingly sick by the time they show up."

Some patients, either out of denial that they have COVID or fear of being in the hospital, don't come in until they're in critical condition, further taxing the emergency department.

"That means we have to quickly assess them and resuscitate them, get them on the oxygen supplies and everything else we can do to help them with their breathing," he said.

Sometimes that means performing the delicate task of intubating someone—pushing a breathing tube into their windpipe to help them breathe—without knowing, for instance, if they have a stomach full of food, which puts them at risk of vomiting.

But if you're so sick you can't breathe, go to the emergency department, said Larsen, who does not want to leave the impression that emergency departments are so busy that they can't see anyone.

"If they're having shortness of breath, if they're having severe chest pains, if you're feeling like you're going to black out, if you have major trauma, broken bones, major lacerations, severe abdominal pain, those are all indications to come to the emergency department," he said.

He said the hospital is seeing a lot of patients who were able to avoid COVID but have now been infected by, presumably, the highly contagious omicron variant.

Larsen himself just recovered from what he called a mild case of COVID. Everyone in his family got it. His wife, who also works in health care. Their three children under the age of 9. All the kids are

vaccinated and he and his wife are vaccinated and boosted.

He had a sore throat for one day.

"Those that are vaccinated or boosted are really having pretty minor symptoms. And my hope is ultimately, as we continue to get vaccinated and get exposed, that they develop that natural immunity to it as well and it becomes just a minor cold, just like we would with anything else," he said.

"The problem is that there's still a large percentage of the population that is not vaccinated. And until they get either COVID or get the vaccine, they're not going to have the immunity to have that happen."

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Citation: 'COVID parties' spread the virus on purpose. That's 'Russian roulette,' doctors warn (2022, January 25) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-covid-parties-virus-purpose-russian.html>

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