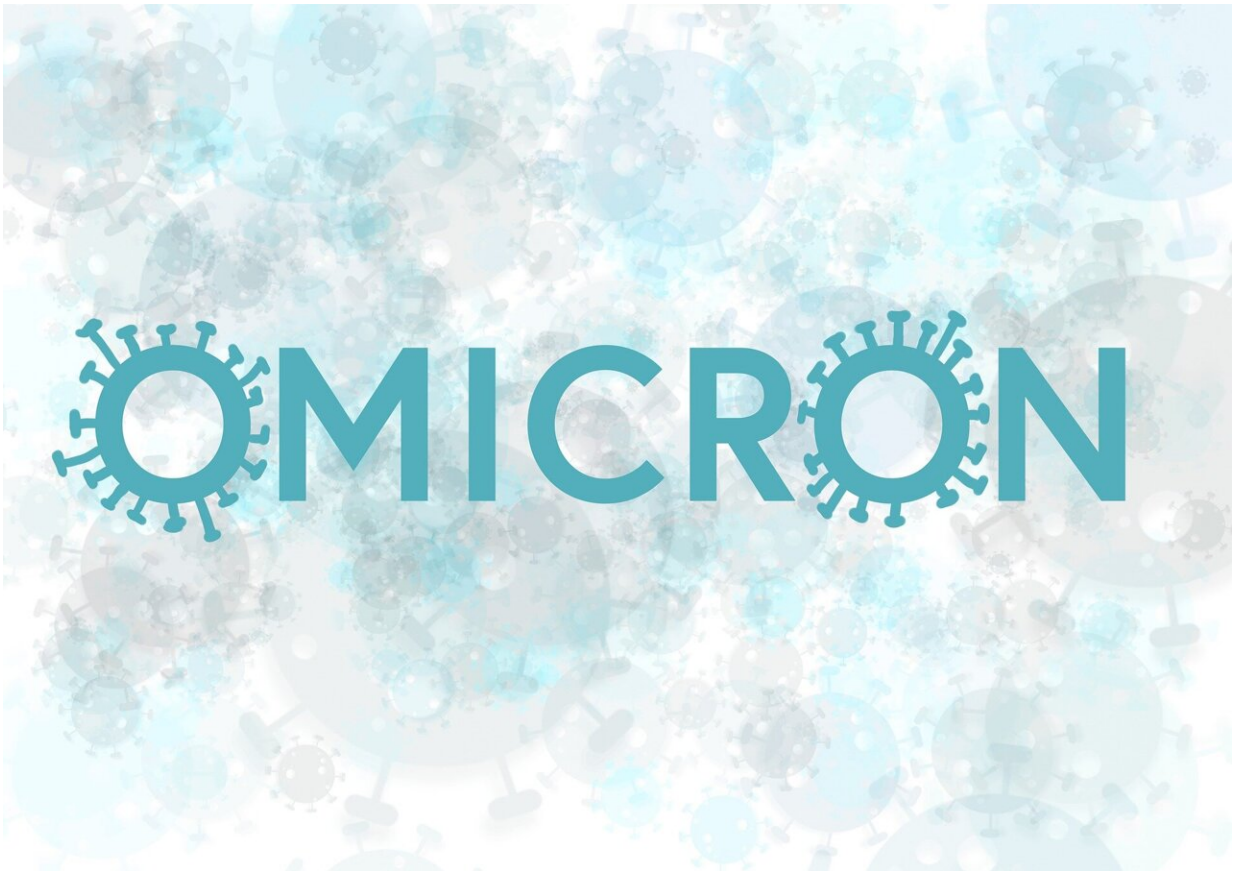


Epidemiology professor offers tips on how to protect yourself from omicron

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The highly contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus has led to a significant rise in infections and breakthrough cases across the country.

Mary Jo Trepka, professor and chair of epidemiology at the Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work, answers questions on how to best protect yourself and your loved ones.

What is the best way to protect yourself from omicron? What is a booster?

The best way to protect yourself from omicron, especially serious illness, is to get the COVID-19 vaccine and a booster. A booster will boost your immune response after your primary series. If you got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and it's been more than two months since your first dose, you need to get a booster. If it's been more than five months since the second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, you need to get a booster.

Boosters are free, just like all the other vaccine doses. You can get an appointment at many places throughout the county. Appointments are available in the evening, during the day and on weekends. It's very easy to do.

What COVID-19 symptoms should I look out for?

SARS-CoV-2—the virus that causes COVID-19—causes essentially flu- and cold-like symptoms. Things you should be looking out for are [runny nose](#), [sore throat](#), fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle and body aches, difficulty tasting or smelling, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. Now, with omicron it is possible that you might only have a runny nose. So really, if you have any symptoms, you should get the COVID-19 [test](#) to make sure that you're not infected and stay at home until you get that test result and feel better.

When and how often should I get tested for the virus?

You should get tested if you are experiencing symptoms or have been in close contact with someone with COVID 19. It is best to be tested at least 5 days after you had your last close contact. If you test too early, the test may be negative even if you were infected.

If you are a close contact and have received your booster dose or if you had a confirmed COVID-19 infection within the last 90 days, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that you do not need to quarantine but you do need to wear a well-fitting mask at all times around other people for 10 days. If you have not received a booster dose or are not vaccinated at all, you should stay home for at least 5 days and monitor symptoms. If you have no symptoms after 5 days, you can leave home but you need to wear a well-fitting mask at all times around other people.

What do I do if I test positive?

If you test positive, the CDC says that you should isolate for at least five days. What is isolation? That means you should go into a special room in wherever you're living and if possible, use just one bathroom that nobody else uses. You should also wear a mask even in your home so that you don't infect other people in your home.

If after five days you don't have a fever and all your symptoms are better, the CDC says you can leave isolation, but you still need to wear a mask for a full five more days. That's a total of 10 days that you need to be super careful. Five days in isolation, five days also of wearing a mask. Now, the thing is, even if you don't have any symptoms at all, and you have a positive test, you still need to isolate. Furthermore, even if you've been vaccinated and fully boosted, you also need to isolate. So, anybody who has a positive test result needs to isolate. That way we can feel comfortable that you're no longer extremely infectious and can infect

other people.

What's the difference between a PCR test and an antigen test?

The PCR test is able to detect new amounts of genetic material, so it's extremely sensitive. That means that if you have a SARS-CoV2 infection, the PCR test is more likely going to pick it up than if you got the antigen test. If you have symptoms and you have a negative antigen test, you should get a PCR test because it's possible that the antigen test is incorrect.

What are we seeing as far as how the omicron variant is affecting people who are unvaccinated and those who are vaccinated?

With the omicron variant, we are seeing that actually all groups of people can get the infection—even people who've had COVID before. But what we're seeing in terms of severe illness is that people who got the booster dose are very unlikely to be in the hospital. If we look at what's happening in Miami-Dade County right now, where most of the people actually are vaccinated, the people in the hospital are mostly unvaccinated people. There are some people who are fully vaccinated, who are in the hospital, but not boosted, but there's very few [people](#) right now who are in the hospital that actually received a booster dose. This just underlines how effective the vaccines are in terms of reducing serious illness.

What measures should be taken by FIU students and faculty to prevent exposure to COVID-19?

The [omicron variant](#) is the predominant variant in our community right now, and it is highly contagious. Now more than ever, we have to be very careful to help protect others around us. What you need to do first of all is fill out the P3 app before you come to campus. If a student has symptoms and the P3 app says to stay home, the student will get an email and they can share that email with their professor and get an excused absence. Professors will work with students so that they can make up any missed material.

The second thing you need to do is you need to wear a mask whenever you're on campus. Wear a mask that is a well-fitting mask, and it's best to get a high-quality mask like a KN95 mask, which is less than a dollar. The third thing to do is to wash your hands regularly, and finally, but most importantly get fully vaccinated. And if it's time for a booster dose, get the [booster](#) dose.

Provided by Florida International University

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