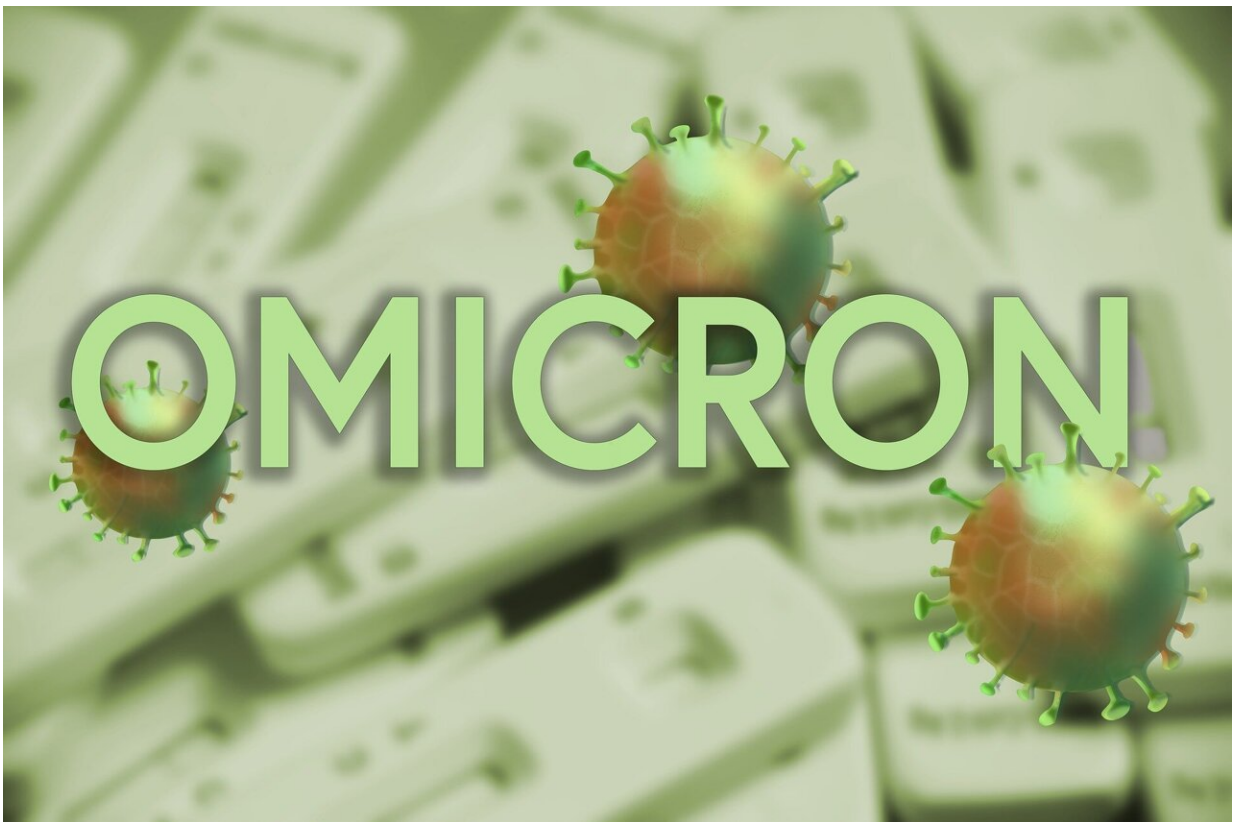


# If Omicron is so contagious, should you try to catch it and get it out of the way? Experts say no

January 13 2022, by Talia Soglin

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As the super-contagious Omicron variant sweeps Chicago, pushing case count graphs vertical, some people who assumed they were safe from

infection after they got their vaccines are entering a new psychological stage of the pandemic: a sense that infection is unavoidable.

"It's so much more contagious," Maggie Coons, 52, of northwest suburban Palatine, told the Tribune last week. "I feel like there's nothing we can do to keep from getting it. I feel like it's inevitable. At this point it's a dreary resignation instead of a dread or fear."

Anecdotally, at least, it appears some people may be taking their resignation to the next step: considering whether to purposefully court COVID so they can get it over with.

Health experts say they have been asked whether there is any point in taking precautions if the likelihood of contracting Omicron is so high.

While such feelings are understandable, [health experts](#) say, people should not abandon preventive public health measures at the height of COVID-19's latest surge.

"Even if it is true that everyone is eventually going to get, particularly, the Omicron [variant](#), it is not a good idea to intentionally try to get it sooner or to completely abandon the preventive measures that we've been taking," said Diane Lauderdale, an epidemiologist and the chair of public health sciences at the University of Chicago.

One problem with this line of thinking, Lauderdale said, is that it's not clear whether getting infected with the Omicron variant now will actually make it less likely that someone will get another COVID-19 [infection](#) down the line.

"Theoretically, one shouldn't get the same infection again—or if they did it should be very mild and should be cleared quickly—but with these mutations and the pace of these mutations, it could be possible that one

does get an infection again in the next round and the next set of variants," said Mercedes Carnethon, an epidemiologist who is the vice chair of preventive medicine at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine.

And even people who are vaccinated and boosted could infect a child under 5 who isn't eligible for vaccination, or a more vulnerable adult.

"It's just considerate to try to avoid getting infected for the time being," Lauderdale said.

Carnethon worries that the messaging about Omicron infections being milder than other variants is "really misleading."

"Our hospitals are filling up," she said. "Our hospitals are rapidly filling up, and so, you know, as mild as it may seem, we're sure treating a lot of it."

People who throw caution to the wind are making the assumption that their own experience will be mild, Carnethon said, something they can't know for sure. And she warned that even though Omicron is the dominant variant right now, other variants, such as the delta variant, are still circulating.

Carnethon said it was too early to know what the risk of long COVID from an Omicron infection is in people who are vaccinated and boosted. Those who are vaccinated and boosted have seemed to be at "slightly lower" likelihood of developing long COVID from infections with other variants. "That's the only extrapolation we can make," she said.

Defeatist thinking around Omicron can become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially when case numbers are so high.

"If you put yourself in a situation with a large group or even a small group of people who are unmasked, you are likely to contract it," Carnethon said.

But taking precautions can still help prevent infection. Despite being boosted, Carnethon herself contracted COVID, along with her husband. But neither of their vaccinated children did.

"Even in the same house, having to isolate and care for young children, we were able to take the steps needed to protect the kids from getting it," she said.

And if you do get infected with Omicron—as many people will—you shouldn't feel like you've failed, Carnethon said.

## **How should vaccinated people be thinking about risk?**

Vaccinated people may feel as if they've entered a new, bewildering phase of the pandemic in which things they assumed were safe to do post-vaccine aren't anymore.

"People should be more careful and more cautious about indoor socialization during the surge," Carnethon said. If you must socialize indoors, she said, wearing masks is "critically important."

Carnethon said she might allow her vaccinated kids to attend a birthday party masked, depending on the setting, but would plan to pick them up before any food was served. She's comfortable with having her kids play with others while masked in a bigger, open space with high ceilings—even indoors—but would avoid crowded venues. If eating or drinking is a central feature of an activity, she'd skip it.

For now, Lauderdale is avoiding restaurants and performances. She's

started wearing masks outdoors when other [people](#) are around, something she had stopped doing before the surge.

"My husband and I just went through all of our music and theatrical subscriptions and were a little relieved to see that we have no tickets coming up for a few weeks," she said.

Those are risks that aren't worth it to Lauderdale. But she acknowledges that at this point in the pandemic, some risks are necessary. People need to make decisions by weighing what risks are worth it to them, she said.

"For the moment, we're operating under the hope that things will be better within a few weeks," Lauderdale said.

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