

How to protect yourself during the omicron surge

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Feeling a little unsure about what's safe to do during the omicron surge? If you're like many people, you may feel just as uncertain as you did at the start of the pandemic.

We asked Michael Lin, MD, MPH, an infectious disease specialist and associate professor at Rush University Medical Center, to help us understand how risky some activities are now as the highly transmissible omicron variant surges through Chicago and the rest of the country.

Is it safe to get together with friends now?

"Any time people are gathering indoors, there's an inherent [risk](#) that the virus will spread," Lin says. That's why Lin encourages everyone to be sensible about their [social activities](#) and to consider what amount of risk they are willing to accept at a time when COVID-19 cases in Illinois are reaching record highs.

Generally speaking, the more people who are involved in a gathering, the greater the risks. That's why Lin recommends avoiding large, indoor social gatherings that involve people outside of your household.

You can reduce your risks for catching the coronavirus and developing severe COVID-19 by keeping gatherings small and making sure that everyone present is "up to date" on their vaccinations (fully vaccinated and boosted if they are eligible), Lin says. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [anyone 12 and older](#) who received the Pfizer series at least five months ago should get boosted. Adults 18 and older who received the Moderna vaccines also should get boosted if they completed their shots at least five months ago, while adults who had the Johnson & Johnson vaccine should get a booster at least two months after their shot.

For indoor gatherings, Lin recommends that anyone age 2 or older wear a well-fitted mask because the omicron variant causes breakthrough infections even among vaccinated individuals, he says. Wearing a mask is especially important if you have a weak immune system, even if you are vaccinated. "We know that if you are immunocompromised, you

may not be fully protected even if you did get your shots," he says.

Another step you can take: If you can find an at-home test, consider testing before your small get-together. "This can add another layer of protection," Lin says. And anyone who has symptoms like a cough or runny nose should opt out of social time.

Still want to be social but don't want to take the risk? The CDC recommends having a virtual gathering. Although this may be a flashback to the early days of the pandemic for some, it is the safest way to go.

Is it OK to dine out at a restaurant during this surge?

One major consideration is whether you are able to stay at least six feet from others to reduce the risk of transmission, Lin says. Most of the risk comes not from diners at other tables necessarily, but from those who are sitting with you at your table if they are from other households.

If you do dine out during the omicron surge, choose your venues carefully. Avoid packed, poorly ventilated places where you cannot practice social distancing, Lin advises. And choose times when it won't be crowded. If there are too many people, find another spot or opt for carryout.

Two more helpful ways to reduce your risk: Wear a well-fitted mask when you are not eating and drinking, and wash your hands frequently or use hand sanitizer.

Also, be sure to bring your vaccination card if you're dining in Chicago and suburban Cook County so you can adhere to the new requirements that went into effect on Jan. 3.

Am I putting myself at risk if I travel now?

Possibly, Lin cautions. One challenge with travel is staying at least six feet apart from strangers in airports, train stations, planes and trains. And much of the risk comes from the COVID-19 prevalence in the area you're traveling to and what activities you are doing while you are traveling.

You can check the COVID-19 trends at your destination before you book a trip. The CDC makes this [information available by county](#).

Is it still OK to go to the grocery store and run errands?

Grocery stores and shopping trips tend to be much lower risk than dining indoors or drinking at bars, Lin says. If you are someone who is at risk for severe illness, consider running errands when stores are the least busy, such as early morning.

Whatever your activities are, the best protection during this surge is to get vaccinated and boosted, Lin says. But it's also important to remember that getting vaccinated won't make you invincible. "Vaccines are not 100 percent effective, which is why we are seeing some breakthrough infections, especially with the omicron variant," Lin says. "But in general, breakthrough infections are mild for those who are vaccinated, and vaccines do an excellent job of preventing severe infections and death."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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