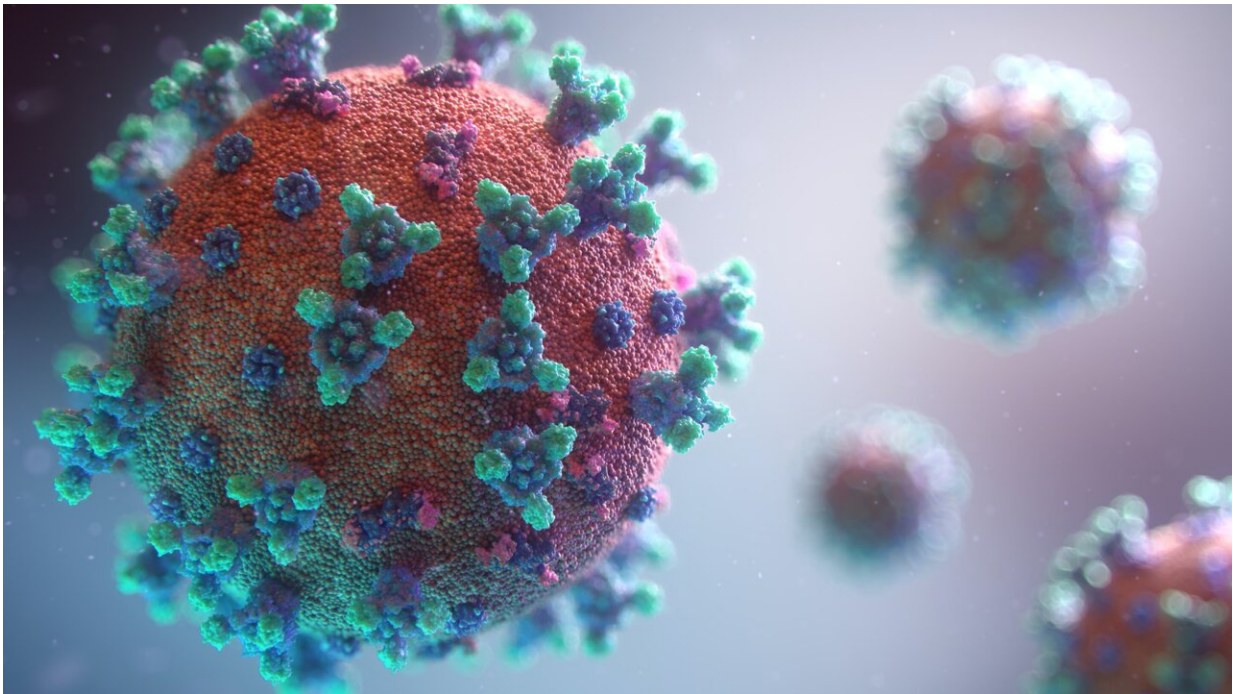


Does it seem like people are catching COVID for the first time now? Here's what we know

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Have you recently contracted COVID-19 for the first time during the pandemic? Those who have avoided the virus for more than two years may be disappointed to catch it during the current, relatively mild wave. But there are a variety of factors contributing to this unofficial, anecdotal trend.

Dr. Dana Hawkinson, an infectious disease specialist at The University of Kansas Health System, spoke with The Star about these so-called COVID "first-timers" and what we can all do to stay safe.

"I've heard more and more anecdotes of people who survived two years without having been infected with SARS-CoV-2 and now they are getting infected," he said in a news briefing.

How many current COVID-19 patients have the disease for the first time?

We don't know. The popularity of home testing and a patchwork system of ways to report positive test results have made case numbers in general extremely difficult to track, while tracking "first-timers" is even harder.

"I don't believe there's any prospective data on who gets it who has not had it before," said Hawkinson. "That would be very difficult to [determine], number one, because we don't even have an accurate count of the total cases."

That's because more people are testing at home, and mass testing events and lab-based COVID testing have declined significantly since the original omicron variant surge, leaving state and CDC officials in the dark about how many positive cases are really out there.

Hawkinson added that while retrospective data about "first-timers" may be available in the future, it would likely take a year or more to gather and report.

"Even that is going to be difficult because you're going to have [to] identify and know for certain that that person did not have [COVID] before," he said.

If you develop symptoms of COVID-19, testing for it as soon as possible is very important, he added. A positive test result will get you access to new antiviral treatments like the highly effective Paxlovid pill, reducing your risk of getting severely ill.

Why are some people catching COVID-19 now after avoiding it for over two years?

Since most knowledge about recent first-time cases is anecdotal, it's difficult to tell how widespread this phenomenon is and what causes it. Dr. Hawkinson said that there is likely a combination of factors to blame. Here are a few he listed:

- Many people are relaxing their mask-wearing and social distancing habits.
- Vaccinated or previously infected people may have the virus but be asymptomatic, causing them to spread it to others without knowing.
- Recent subvariants of the omicron strain, including BA.2.12.1, BA.4 and BA.5, may be better at evading the immune system's antibodies than previous variants.
- The arrival of summer has led to more travel and social gatherings where the virus can be spread.

The CDC lists the counties that make up the Kansas City metro area in the "high" risk category for community transmission of COVID-19. They are part of the nearly 79% of U.S. counties with this rating.

If I got vaccinated, why did I still catch COVID? Does this mean vaccines don't work?

No. The existing COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective against the

worst effects of the virus, and are working just as they were intended to.

"The vaccines were never meant to prevent infection," Hawkinson told The Star. "It does have some mild protection against infection, especially in that short time, say four to six weeks after your vaccine dose. But... for six months or more we see that you have continued good immunity and good protection against hospitalization, severe disease and death."

Hawkinson added that new formulations of the vaccine are already in development and are going through trials right now. These new vaccines may include increased protection against omicron and its subvariants. News about these new vaccines could be released as soon as the next month or two.

If you're wondering how long your [booster shot](#) will last, we wrote this guide.

What can I do to prevent catching COVID-19 for the first time?

The guidance on avoiding COVID-19 hasn't changed: Hawkinson advised practicing social distancing, wearing a mask indoors and avoiding large gatherings. It's also important to get vaccinated with an mRNA [vaccine](#) (Pfizer or Moderna) if you haven't already.

Booster shots are also extremely important to reinforce your body's defenses against the virus. You can get a booster shot as soon as four months after you complete your initial round of vaccination, and some people are also eligible for a second booster after that.

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