

FLiRTy summer: All you need to know about the latest COVID variants

July 22 2024, by Robin Foster



As yet another batch of variants fuel a COVID surge this summer, one expert offers advice on how to navigate the threat.

"We've seen a bit of a seasonal pattern emerge, where we've had an uptick in COVID in the summer and then another one in the

winter—usually the winter one being more severe," said Dr. Michael Ben-Aderet, associate medical director of hospital epidemiology at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles.

This summer, the western part of the country is seeing the biggest spike in cases. Wastewater data for the region shows the [virus](#) that causes COVID-19 jumping from moderate to high levels in late June.

What's driving the spike? The so-called FLiRT variants of COVID, such as KP.3 and KP.2, are newer versions of the virus that began spreading in the spring.

Ben-Aderet noted that pattern has become familiar.

"This has been the case for a couple of years. Why that is, I don't think anyone truly understands," he said. "A lot of viruses are seasonal in nature. Some viruses are seasonal in summer; some are in winter. COVID-19 seems to be in both."

While some of that is due to how the COVID virus spread, human behavior is also at play, he added.

"School being out, people being on vacation, people traveling, people mixing and doing more activities, [it] does play a role in that summer surge," Ben-Aderet said.

How can you protect yourself against infection?

"Masks still work. Make sure to wear a good, well-fitting mask. They've been proven to help prevent the spread of COVID-19," he said. "If you haven't been vaccinated, vaccines are still available, and it's really best to be up to date on your vaccinations. Avoid being around others who are sick. If you are exposed or if you're sick, stay home if you don't need to

go out."

If you aren't spared during this summer surge, what can you expect with the new variants?

Importantly, the symptoms and severity of FLiRT infections largely mirror those of previous variants, Ben-Aderet stressed.

"We're still seeing the relatively mild disease that we've been seeing with COVID-19 over the past year," he said. "It's primarily an upper respiratory illness. So think fever, chills, cough, [runny nose](#), stuffiness—similar to a cold, essentially. And sometimes, [gastrointestinal symptoms](#)."

Luckily, available testing still detects the FLiRT variants, while Paxlovid is still widely available and works very well, he said.

More information: The CDC has more on [COVID-19](#).

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