

ASK THE EXPERT



New COVID-19 Strains, Herd Immunity and Our Return To “Normal”

New variants of the COVID-19 virus have emerged. Are these new strains more contagious? Are two masks better than one? We asked these questions and more to Dr. Lisa Harris, Vice President of Medical Affairs at Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. There’s a lot we know, but there’s also a lot we don’t know as the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve. Dr. Harris shares the latest below.

Q. Dr. Harris, it’s been reported that there are new strains of the COVID-19 virus — now within the United States. What is the latest information on this?

- ✔ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported three new strains globally. These were first found in the U.K., South Africa and Brazil, and all three new strains have been seen in the U.S. as of the end of January 2021. Based on case counts, these new strains seem to spread more easily and faster than the original virus. **Though they may be more contagious, there is no evidence to prove that these strains are deadlier.**

Lisa Y. Harris, MD, FAAP, FACP, CPE

Dr. Lisa Y. Harris is Vice President of Medical Affairs at Excellus BCBS. She is a fellow of the American College of Physicians, fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and a Certified Physician Executive through the American Association of Physician Leaders. Board-certified in internal medicine and pediatrics, Dr. Harris has been in clinical practice since 1995.

Q. The vaccine gives hope to many people right now. If a person receives the COVID-19 vaccine, will it protect them against these new strains? Will the vaccine still be 95% effective?

- ✔ **So far, the data suggests that the current vaccines will also protect against the virus variants (new strains).** A 95% effective rate has not been proven against the new variants yet, but it is being studied closely.

Q. We know the importance of washing our hands, social distancing and wearing a mask. But, what about double masking? Should we be wearing two masks instead of one?

- ✔ **There is data that supports double masking, especially if you do not have a medical grade mask.** A way to think about it is that wearing one mask protects you from me, but the additional mask protects me from you. Another option would be wearing a mask that has two layers, or an insert for additional protection. Gaiters when folded to create two to three layers are considered effective.

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Q. If someone has already had COVID-19 and recovered or received the COVID-19 vaccine, is it safe to start doing “normal” activities like travel?

- ✔ It depends on your definition of safe. It’s important to remember that the pandemic still exists, and the threat of the virus remains. **Neither the vaccine nor prior COVID-19 exposure grants you 100% immunity from the virus.** While receiving the vaccine may make you highly unlikely to get a serious case of COVID-19, the evidence suggests that you may still be able to transfer COVID-19 to someone else. Based on those risks, **the CDC** recommends delaying travel and staying home to protect yourself and others. **If emergency travel is necessary, different states have different travel requirements and a negative COVID-19 test is required for all airlines.**

Q. Experts are saying that herd immunity is necessary for things to slowly return to “normal” or our “new normal.” Can you expound on that?

- ✔ Herd immunity is when enough people have immunity that the virus is unlikely to spread. In other words, the entire community (herd) is protected, because the majority of people are immune, even if there are other individuals who are not. **We need approximately 70% of people vaccinated to begin to assume herd immunity.** Based on the current rollout and distribution of the vaccine, our best guesses are that herd immunity could be achieved summer 2021, but we still need to be cautious.

Q. This information is very helpful. Are you optimistic about the future, post-pandemic?

- ✔ **I am optimistic.** The scientific and medical advancements seen during this pandemic have been incredible. What we’ve learned will help us prepare and plan for the future.



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We’re continuing to monitor COVID-19 and vaccine developments. Visit our resource website for updates on what you need to know.



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