

Editorial: Why I Still Mask-Up

By Ann Gerhardt, MD

July 1, 2021

The CDC unmasked the country, despite reporting that only 43% of people have been fully vaccinated. That's far from the 70-75% that public health experts have said is necessary for herd immunity. People congregate shoulder to shoulder in bars, just in time to welcome the more contagious, quadruply mutated, SARS-CoV-2 virus, known as the Delta variant. This is like giving away the umbrella because we're dry in a rainstorm (to paraphrase the late, great RBG).

Just being vaccinated doesn't guarantee immunity. No COVID vaccine confers 100% protection. Even 95% protection refers to a population, not an individual, and individuals' immune systems vary. Studies that analyzed vaccine data by demographic group showed significantly less protection (60-66%) in people older than 60. The immune system weakens with age, reducing the response to vaccines as well as infections. It's why the elderly often die of a pneumonia that wouldn't kill a young person.

I received the J & J vaccine, which prevents death and severe illness almost 100%, but any COVID illness only 65%. Even mild-moderate illness can result in "long-haul" COVID. I have patients with this syndrome - It has basically ruined their lives, even though they are no longer infected.

I'm very concerned about the Delta variant and mutants to come. Apparently the current major vaccines protect against the Delta variant. But we don't have herd immunity, so people in the community are infected. As long as there is a significant reservoir of humans for the Delta variant to call home, it can continue to mutate, possibly into something against which the vaccines don't protect. Who wants to be the guinea pig to try to disprove this possibility?

I'm concerned that we won't achieve herd immunity, because too many people still refuse it. Per surveys by various health organizations, here are the predominant reasons people give for refusing it: Fear of side effects. Distrust of Trump's rush to produce a vaccine. Inadequate proof of short- and long-term safety. Lack of access and coverage (the government pays for vaccine, but many people live in healthcare deserts and would have to get the vaccine at pharmacies or grocery stores that charge to stick it in an arm.) Fear inspired by conspiracy theories about it containing computer chips or magnets or changing our DNA. They feel that their risk of COVID-19 is less than that of side effects, since they haven't been infected so far and they don't know anyone who has died or suffered from long-term effects of the disease. No one they trust has urged them to be vaccinated.

I also know people who have told me in no uncertain words that they refuse to be told what to do, don't care about risking side effects in order to contribute to the public good and say that if the CDC says we don't need masks anymore, why get vaccinated?

Until we really have conquered SARS-CoV-2, I'm wearing a mask outside my home, keeping my distance from others wherever possible, requiring mask-wearing in my office and dining at home or at restaurants with distanced outside seating. I like not being infected, not only with COVID-19, but also with influenza and other respiratory viruses.