Staying Healthy Post-Pandemic

Summer is quickly approaching, mask mandates are lifting for those who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and many parts of the U.S. are slowly but surely returning to normal – or moving toward a "new" normal. Experts across the country are advising communities to continue to practice some of the safety measures put into place other the course of the pandemic – which include hand washing, maintaining a distance from others especially when ill, wiping down surfaces, and more.

While the prevalence of COVID-19 is slowing down in many areas, the combination of easing up on restrictions and resuming gatherings with family, friends, and coworkers can potentially result in a rise in cases of other illnesses. Dr. Bill Walsh, chief medical officer at OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois, says it's important to stay safe and healthy in a post-pandemic world.

"Most people have not had colds. They have not had bronchitis. They have not had strep throat or other simple, contagious infections. While they are simple, it is quite unpleasant when you get a bad cold. You can still get a fever, a sore throat – and they will share a lot of symptoms with COVID illness. We have noticed that last year there was essentially no flu season, no influenza last winter. That is most likely because people were wearing masks," says Dr. Walsh.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), flu season typically begins in October and usually peaks between December and February. Data from the CDC shows that from October 2019 through April 2020, there were approximately 40 million cases of the flu in the U.S., resulting in 22,000 deaths. In comparison, the 2020-2021 flu season has been nearly nonexistent due to the safety measures that were put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This also rings true for other common illnesses such as colds, strep throat, and more.

"We expect that there is going to be a rise possibly in influenza but most certainly in simple upper respiratory infections such as a cold or strep throat as people take the masks off. They have not been getting these illnesses over the past year, year and a half – but they will likely increase now as people stop masking," Dr. Walsh explained.

While we have known for years that practices such as hand washing and avoiding crowds when you are sick reduces the spread of germs, the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed this. Dr. Walsh recommends continuing to utilize some of the COVID-19 safety measures in the months and years ahead – especially when you are feeling a bit under the weather.

"I still think it's a great idea to do the elbow bump, or a little bow and smile with your eyes to greet somebody. It is OK not to shake people's hands. You can wave at them from five or six feet away to say hi. That is a habit that has prevented all kinds of illnesses over the past year, year and a half," said Dr. Walsh.

So how do we move forward from here?

"What have we learned over the past year and a half as the pandemic raged throughout our city, our country, our world? We've learned that wearing masks and washing our hands and keeping our distance help to keep us safe and healthy. So moving forward as we navigate, hopefully, a post-pandemic world I think we all need to remember that whether it's COVID or influenza or the common cold or strep throat – washing our hands, wearing a mask, and keeping our distance keeps us healthy," Dr. Walsh said.

Pre-pandemic, many people would venture out to run errands, attend gatherings, and show up to work even when feeling a bit under the weather. However, one important lesson from this pandemic that many have learned is that if you are not feeling well, it may be best to refrain from leaving the house and interacting with others in order to avoid spreading germs. Perhaps, most importantly, you need to allow time to rest and recover next time you experience a cold, flu, strep throat, or other common illness. If you are in need of an urgent care location near you, go to www.osfhealthcare.org.