Delta variant plus Fourth of July gatherings equals concern among health leaders

A weekly national survey finds broad awareness and concern about the emerging COVID-19 delta variant. But people's behaviors really aren't changing in the face of that threat. According to the latest Axios-Ipsos poll, people who are vaccinated are confident they're protected. A majority of those polled say attending Fourth of July celebrations poses a small risk or no risk at all (59%); the same is true for taking a vacation (64%).

The delta variant now accounts for about 1 in every 5 new coronavirus infections in the U.S., according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). With more than half of the population still not fully vaccinated, health experts and officials worry that regions with low amounts of virus protection could see surges.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker on Monday urged unvaccinated residents to get their COVID-19 shots, warning of a "growing presence" of the highly contagious delta variant that he and state public health officials expect to dominate cases statewide by the fall. Robert Ayers, MD, an Occupational Health physician for OSF HealthCare, is worried about the delta variant and Fourth of July gatherings that might spread rapidly among unvaccinated individuals.

Dr. Ayers says the variant now makes up nearly 20% of all cases in the U.S., and data experts predict that number is going to keep doubling if more people aren't vaccinated. The CDC and World Health Organization call delta "a variant of concern," and some researchers say it is as much as 60% more transmissible than the alpha variant discovered in the U.K. alpha was also more contagious than the original strain of the virus.

"The cases that we're seeing, they're younger, they're sicker just because the virus seems to be a little more contagious. Whether I'm able to shed more virus out of my nose, and with respiratory droplets, it's a higher concentration of virus so I'm able to spread more with this variant than with some of the other, earlier variants."

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has shown to be 88% effective against symptomatic infections caused by the delta variant – two weeks after the second dose. Moderna's vaccine was found in lab tests to work against new variants such as the delta strain, according to the company. Dr. Ayers says there is less data but still good evidence the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine is also effective against variants.

Those who are only partially vaccinated have significantly less protection, according to Dr. Ayers. The completely unvaccinated are taking an unnecessary risk.

"We know that the vaccines seem to be controlling this virus variant. Even though it's concerning, it's still more of a concern for the unvaccinated population."

With vaccines so widely available, almost every COVID-19 death is preventable, but Dr. Ayers says convincing otherwise healthy, younger people they could die from an infection is a challenge, even though it happens every day.

"Younger people tend not to get vaccinated anyway for other diseases, (including) flu. So, it is a concern that yes, you are vulnerable and yes, this variant seems to be affecting your age group and it's time now to make a decision about what you're doing to do going forward," he advises.

The country's top infectious disease doctor, Anthony Fauci, believes young people aren't resistant to getting vaccinated, but in his words, "It's just not top on their list." He took to Youtube this week and recently was using Tik Tok to explain the impact of the delta variant and to warn young people to get vaccinated now to help put an end to the pandemic.

Currently, COVID-19 vaccines are readily available and anyone 12 and older is eligible to receive one. Vaccinations can be self-scheduled at osfhealthcare.org/vaccine.