COVID's razor: What to know this fall

We're approaching the late summer-early fall period when respiratory illnesses begin their annual upswing. The latest news from federal health officials concerns a new variant of COVID-19, NB.1.8.1. Some people impacted have reported severe sore throats, almost like there's a razor blade in there.

Fred Burke, MD, an emergency medicine physician who sees patients at OSF HealthCare, says illnesses like COVID, RSV and the flu will always be around. It's just a matter of taking precautions to avoid serious illness. So, what's the level of concern with this new COVID variant as we begin to make fall plans?

The razor's edge

Any sore throat is an annoyance. But Dr. Burke says you should monitor severe cases closely.

"You're less likely to want to eat or drink, which can lead to further dehydration," he says.

You can manage sore throats at home with Tylenol or ibuprofen, chloraseptic spray, warm tea and throat lozenges. Dr. Burke says if you have trouble keeping food or fluids down, feel lightheaded or dizzy or have trouble breathing, see a health care provider right away.

COVID precautions

Dr. Burke says this new COVID variant isn't linked to as much severe illness as other variants. But, he says it's more easily spread.

"The average healthy person might get through it with some [figurative] bumps and bruises and little to no symptoms. For people with comorbidities or who are immunocompromised, the virus might be a little bit more detrimental," Dr. Burke says.

Getting vaccinated and practicing good hygiene are two big tools to avoid serious illness, he adds. Wash your hands and high touch surfaces, like doorknobs, often, don't cough or sneeze into the open air and stay home and away from others when you don't feel well. If you're in a crowd, especially if you have a comorbidity like diabetes, Dr. Burke says you should consider wearing a mask.

"If you're going to have a gathering, whether at home or somewhere else, you can also recommend people take a home test to make sure they don't have COVID prior to going," Dr. Burke suggests. Those at-home tests can usually be found over the counter at a pharmacy.

For vaccines, recent preliminary guidance from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends the shot this fall for people 65 and up. For others, the shot is recommended for people who have a compromised immune system or a comorbid condition like obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, lung disease or depression. The website for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, meanwhile, has a broader recommendation. When in doubt, Dr. Burke says to talk to your primary care provider.

Learn more

Explore other resources to keep yourself safe from COVID on the OSF HealthCare website, blog and newsroom.