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What We Know Entering Year Three of the Pandemic

By Savannah Chess

COLLEGE STATION, Texas—As we enter year three of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts continue to look at the steps that should be taken toward mitigation, the likelihood of transitioning into an endemic, and what the future of the virus will look like.

Health experts have been tirelessly studying COVID-19 for the past two years with the purpose of finding a world where we can live with the virus.

We are currently seeing a mix of Omicron and the newer BA.2 variant, which is a branch from the Omicron variant family tree, said Dr. Ben Neuman, professor of biology. We have arrived at the point in the pandemic where almost everybody has gained at least a little immunity, driving out variants like Delta which are unable to grow in a person with immunity and leaving us with the variants that can get through, he said. Neuman compares it to that of the tortoise and the hare story.

“Delta was very fast growing, that’s like the hare,” Neuman said. “It was winning the race, but as soon as things got tough, bam, it gets knocked out and there’s no way for it to come back. Omicron is more like a tortoise. It’s not particularly faster or better, it’s just armored. It is able to get past some of our defenses in a way that means that it keeps going.”

As some states begin shifting toward an “endemic” response, COVID is becoming something that will be here for the foreseeable future, said Gerald Parker, associate dean at the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

“We are not going to be able to eliminate it and we are learning how to live with it,” said Parker. “And that’s through vaccinations.”

As of January 21, almost 63% of Brazos Valley is fully vaccinated according to the Texas Department of State Health Services COVID-19 dashboards. Texas A&M has helped by providing accessible vaccines and free rapid antigen tests that you can do wherever and whenever, said Neuman. According to The World Health Organization, efficacy wanes around four to six months after the first two shots and receiving a booster will help to strengthen your protection.

While the virus does predominately affect the older demographic, there is still concern for college aged students, children, and people a little older than college aged, said Angela Clendenin, instructional assistant professor in the epidemiology department. A little over 6,000 people in the age range 18-29 have passed away from COVID since January 2020, according to the CDC.

“I think that’s one thing that’s important to know about COVID-19, that yes, if you are healthy and you’re not immunocompromised, you might be better able to deal with a case of COVID than someone who has other chronic health conditions or is immunocompromised,” said Clendenin. “But it doesn’t mean that you won’t get it and it doesn’t mean that if you get it, you might not have some underlying health conditions.”

With the recent elimination of mask mandates in many states and many people questioning if the pandemic is over, Clendenin said that vaccines remain the best way to protect yourself from severe disease, keep you out of hospitals, and protect your families from the same situation. For those who choose not to get vaccinated, there are still physical mitigation measures that can be taken, such as social distancing, washing your hands, and covering your cough and sneeze, she said.

“It’s not a signal that the pandemic is over,” Clendenin said. “What it is, is a signal that it’s time for us to take individual responsibilities by controlling this disease.”

A concern that has come up now that the virus has been seen in animal reservoirs is the risk of COVID jumping to animals, mutating, and then jumping back to humans, said Parker. More than 90 percent of the captive white-tailed deer at one facility tested positive for the virus, reflecting both human-to-deer and deer-to-deer transmission, according to a new study by Texas A&M’s College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

“So, we want to maintain our surveillance systems, sequencing systems and so forth so that we hopefully detect the next variant of concern sooner rather than later,” said Parker.

Professors at Texas A&M have noted several things that the university has done well to minimize the spread of COVID. Limiting the number of students in classrooms and spending extra money on electricity to increase the airflow in all of the buildings capable of it were two very smart decisions, said Dr. Julian Leibowitz, professor of microbial pathogenesis and immunology. Disinfecting buildings at regular intervals, free tests for students and faculty, large testing days and readily available masks and hand sanitizer have all been key to the campus’ success in fighting COVID, said Clendenin.

"I know that as of Summer of 2021, before this past fall, there was not a truly documented case of classroom transmissions of COVID-19 and that's because of those mitigation efforts that we put in place," said Clendenin.

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Sources:

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