

Omicron surge to continue into February

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The Omicron variant of COVID-19 is causing record numbers of cases, but there is an end to the surge in sight.

That's the message Dr. Timothy Brewer, an infectious disease expert from the UCLA School of Medicine, shared last week while participating in a Lunch with the Doc meeting with State Sen. Mike McGuire.

McGuire hosted the event to give his constituents, which includes those in Del Norte County, an accurate picture of what is happening in California and around the nation.

"After nearly two years of being in the pandemic, folks are sick of it," McGuire said. "I get it, and it's incredibly frustrating to be here today. But we need to hang tough because we are in the middle of the latest surge. Hospitals across the state are starting to fill up, and we need to buckle down for the next few weeks."

Brewer said Omicron has led to record cases in California, with one in 66 California residents confirmed as having COVID. In some counties, that number is up to one in eight people.

"The bottom line is this," Brewer said. "We're seeing COVID-positive case numbers absolutely skyrocket in every corner of the country. Obviously there has been a tremendous toll on not only the country but the state as well."

But the good news is the rapid increase in cases will likely end in middle to late February with cases then dropping equally as fast.

Brewer said while much has been made about COVID breakthrough cases increasing during Omicron, the vaccine is working. He said when fully vaccinated, the risk of infection is four times lower, the risk of hospitalization is eight times lower and the risk of death is 21 times lower than the unvaccinated.

"As long as the SARS COV 2 virus can transmit person to person, new variants will emerge, and that's what happened with Omicron," Brewer said. "Omicron spreads more easily than Delta and it's capable of infecting people Delta couldn't."

And the level of contagiousness is seen in the numbers. Last winter, the state was in the middle of a surge and was reporting 45,000 to 50,000 new cases a day. It is now up to 85,000 cases a day.

Brewer was asked a question about masking and whether it works with Omicron. The short answer is yes, although some masks work better than others.

"Masks have two components to them," Brewer said. "One is the material the mask is made out of. The second is how does it fit on your face. Those two will determine how well it works. The best mask is an N-95 respirator."

Brewer said he would rank masks with the N-95 or K-95 at the top, a surgical mask second and cloth masks at the bottom. He recommended people who use cloth masks to add a surgical mask over them for greater effectiveness.

Brewer was also asked if he felt comfortable going out to eat in today's climate.

"I only go out when I feel well," he responded. "If I do go out, I will make sure I have a well-fitting mask. I will try to stay at least three to six feet away from others in the restaurant."

He did say eating outdoors is safer than eating indoors due to better ventilation.

Brewer said while Omicron is surging, there is always concern of future variants. And due to the kind of virus it is, it will likely not go away.

"The bad news is the virus is very well adapted to change," Brewer said. "We can see this in our own communities. This virus is really capable and spreading from person to person. That makes it really difficult to get rid of. As long as the virus is spreading and mutating, that makes it very difficult to get rid of. New variants that are going to emerge are ones that are capable of out competing the variants out there. That's why we're dealing with Omicron now."

He said with COVID's ability to adapt and mutate, it is not going anywhere anytime soon.

"It's entirely possible that it's going to be like influenza where we get a shot every year," Brewer said. "It's hard to imagine the virus is going away. So we're probably going to be wearing masks and getting boosters for at least the foreseeable future."