

## Globe and Mail Opinion

### Omicron is discouraging but a strong response now may bring the end in sight

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With the arrival of the fast-moving [Omicron variant](#), there's much to be dejected about on the pandemic front.

We're seeing record COVID-19 case numbers in almost every province, and those disturbing daily case counts will likely continue for days or weeks.

There is an alarming number of breakthrough cases too – infections in the vaccinated.

Increased and stricter public-health measures – including limits on the size of gatherings; full and partial closure of some spaces; travel restrictions; and more – are coming as well, as they should, because limiting the spread of the coronavirus is essential at this point.

Yet, despite the grim headlines and the even grimmer prospect of another locked-down Christmas, we can't allow ourselves to give in to apocalyptic despair.

There's actually a lot to be hopeful about.

First of all, we are dramatically better off than we were at the beginning of the pandemic (which, while it seems a lifetime ago, was December, 2019). We are also in a much better position than we were for our first pandemic Christmas, one year ago, thanks largely to vaccines.

No, vaccines are not 100-per-cent effective. No one ever expected they would be. But they are game-changers.

Vaccination dramatically reduces the risk of hospitalization and death, and that's true even with [the variants](#). If you have had a third shot, you have about 95-per-cent protection against severe illness from the Delta variant and 85-per-cent protection against Omicron.

Impressively, 29.3 million Canadians have received two vaccine doses, and 4.3 million three doses.

Don't fall for the cynical rhetoric of the selfishly unvaccinated, such as failed politician Maxime Bernier, who tweeted recently that "both the vaccinated and unvaccinated can spread the virus."

While that is superficially true, it reeks of false equivalency. As American professor Dr. Sarah Parcak responded in a now viral [tweet](#): "Both Serena Williams and I can play tennis."

The point here, masterfully made, is that the unvaccinated are still far more at risk of poor outcomes if they contract the coronavirus.

Vaccines aren't the only tool in our pandemic toolbox either. We've gotten much better at treating COVID-19, with the arrival of antivirals, and a better understanding of how to best use monoclonal antibodies and other drugs.

If there is an overarching message that has emerged in the last couple of years, it's that we have to embrace a range of public-health measures: vaccination; testing (including rapid testing); masking (ideally with N95 masks); better ventilation; physical distancing; limits on crowd sizes; and so on.

But we have to use each of those methods smartly. For example, everyone will need a third shot (sometimes called a booster), but boosters should be [targeted](#) at the most vulnerable, not made available willy-nilly.

Similarly, despite our current enthusiasm for [rapid tests](#), they too have to be used appropriately. We should be using our limited number of tests to ensure essential workers are protected, not to make it easier for people to have large holiday gatherings.

Because the Omicron variant spreads so easily, our current efforts should be aimed at reducing contacts between people. That's why [restrictions](#) are needed and why we're going to see a flurry of announcements from provinces and territories in the coming days.

Omicron is moving faster than we can vaccinate, so our public officials need to move faster still.

While early research shows Omicron causes less severe illness, it's still a numbers game. The sheer quantity of infections we're going to see – likely a doubling from 10,000 cases to 20,000 cases daily by later this week – will translate into more hospitalizations and place tremendous pressure again on hospitals.

And that's one place where we're much worse off than a year ago. Health workers are burned out and leaving their jobs in record numbers.

Still, if we can gird ourselves for a few short weeks of restrictions, the worst should pass by early to mid-February, and when we come out the other end, we will have far more Canadians with immunity.

This may be the darkest period yet of the pandemic, but it could also be a harbinger of a shift from a pandemic to an [endemic](#) – the much anticipated life-goes-on phase.

As the theologian Thomas Fuller famously said: "The darkest hour is just before the dawn."