

THE MORNING NEWSLETTER

## *Breakthrough Covid, in Perspective*

We offer advice about how to think about the cases.



By David Leonhardt

July 26, 2021, 6:45 a.m. ET

Breakthrough infections — in which vaccinated people nonetheless get the Covid-19 virus — are one of those vexing topics that can be difficult to put in perspective.

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On the one hand, breakthrough infections are obviously occurring. They've happened to the New York Yankees and to White House officials, as well at summer gatherings in Massachusetts, Oklahoma and elsewhere. My colleague Liam Stack recently got sick with a breakthrough infection (and I'll tell you his story below).

On the other hand, the scale of breakthrough infections remains unclear. Are they a significant reason that cases are now surging in the U.S. — and a reason for vaccinated people to be concerned? Or are breakthrough infections rare exceptions that receive outsize attention?

Those are two very different scenarios. If breakthrough infections are an important source of Covid spread, it would suggest that vaccinated people should resume some of their previous precautions, like avoiding crowded places. If Covid is instead

spreading overwhelmingly among the unvaccinated, it would suggest that the behavior of the vaccinated doesn't matter very much; the only reliable way to reduce caseloads would involve more vaccinations.

I'm going to warn you up front that I don't have a definitive answer for you. "There's a lot of uncertainty right now," as Natalie Dean, a biostatistician at Emory University, told me. But there is some evidence that can help you think through the situation while scientists collect more data.

## **What we know**

Let's start with a few facts that are clear:

- Vaccinated people are nearly guaranteed not to be hospitalized or killed by Covid.
- Among children under 12, who remain ineligible for the vaccine, serious forms of Covid are also extremely rare. Children face bigger risks when they ride in a car.
- The Delta variant does not appear to change either of those facts.
- Millions of unvaccinated American adults are vulnerable to hospitalization or death from Covid.

Given all of this, the most effective Covid-fighting strategy has not changed, experts say: "Shots in arms," as my colleague Apoorva Mandavilli writes. Or as Dean says, "The biggest problem is that there are a lot of people with no protection."

And there are measures that would almost certainly increase vaccinations: Full F.D.A. approval (which hasn't happened despite public endorsements of the vaccines by the F.D.A.'s leaders); vaccine mandates from employers and local governments; and pro-vaccination messages from Republican politicians, professional athletes and other people who have credibility among vaccine skeptics. Any of these steps would almost certainly have a bigger effect than behavioral changes among the vaccinated.

Still, I understand why many vaccinated people are wondering if they should change their behavior. I feel the same way. I don't want to contribute to the spread of the virus, and I would rather not contract even a modest version of Covid.

Among other reasons, the risks of "long Covid" remain uncertain. Yes, those risks get exaggerated sometimes: Many viruses, like influenza, cause long-term symptoms, and some of the focus on long Covid stems from society's current obsession with all things Covid. There is still no rigorous study that compares long Covid with "long flu." But long Covid is probably worse, which argues for caution.

## **What we don't know**

How common, then, are breakthrough infections?

One reason for optimism is the recent trend among the most vaccinated segments of society: older people. About 80 percent of Americans over age 65 have been fully vaccinated. This chart looks at the U.S. since late June, when cases began rising:

This chart looks at England — where more than 90 percent of older people are vaccinated — since late May, when cases began rising there:

As you can see, new cases have risen only modestly among people over 65, suggesting that breakthrough infections are rare. “I think people who are vaccinated are not, on a population level, major contributors to the transmission of the disease,” Dr. David Dowdy, a Johns Hopkins University epidemiologist, told me.

Part of the reason is that vaccinated people are both less likely to get infected and less likely to pass on the virus even if they do get infected, scientists say. A vaccinated person without Covid symptoms seems especially unlikely to infect somebody else.

“What is clear is that people who are vaccinated and have symptomatic breakthrough infections can transmit it to other people,” Dr. Ashish Jha of Brown University said. “What is not at all clear is whether vaccinated asymptomatic people can transmit it. And my best guess is no — or not very often.”

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#### EDITORS' PICKS

**Bruce Kirby, Who Transformed Sailing With a ‘Doodle,’  
Dies at 92**

July 23, 2021

**The Extraordinary  
Quarantine**

July 26, 2021

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He added: “I’m not worried about an asymptomatic vaccinated person spreading it to me.”

Of course, a vaccinated person can still get the virus from somebody who has symptoms or hasn’t been vaccinated. Liam Stack, a Times reporter who covers religion, was fully vaccinated by April but nonetheless caught the virus in June,

probably socializing with friends, either at a bar or a beach house, he says.

“It was not the sickest I’ve ever been, but it was very disruptive,” he told me. He was sick for a full week, with flulike symptoms, including congestion, muscle aches and fatigue. One day, he took a three-hour nap around lunchtime, followed by a two-hour nap before dinner.

Liam is feeling better now, and, as far as he knows, none of his friends or family members contracted the virus from him. But he does not recommend the experience. “It was unpleasant,” he said.

A Covid-19 testing site in Palmetto, Fla. Octavio Jones for The New York Times

## **The bottom line**

Different vaccinated people are going to make different decisions, and that’s OK. I find the risk of breakthrough infections to be small enough that I’m not going to make major changes to my behavior.

I would feel differently if I lived in a community with a lower vaccination rate — or if I lived with somebody who was vulnerable to Covid because of an immunodeficiency. And the current surge in cases has changed my thinking. I will

again wear a mask sometimes when in close contact with strangers, even if it has little tangible effect. The main reason to do so, as Dowdy said, is to contribute to a shared sense that we have entered a worrisome new phase of the pandemic.

It's also important that the country not respond in ways that would do more harm than good — say, by delaying the full reopening of schools, Dowdy added. For vaccinated people, Covid still represents a very small risk, and the cost of our response should not exceed the benefits.

But when cases are surging, as they are now, our approach to Covid should be different than when they are plunging.

**For more:** My colleague Tara Parker-Pope and Slate's Susan Matthews have both written thoughtful pieces with advice about breakthrough infections. And today's episode of "The Daily" examines the subject too.

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## THE LATEST NEWS

### The Virus

- Hopeful news: Caseloads are falling in Britain — as happened in India — suggesting the Delta variant may fade more quickly than initially feared.
- Phil Valentine, a Tennessee radio host, scoffed at getting vaccinated. Now hospitalized, he is urging listeners to get the shot.
- "A lot of small battles": Louisiana health officials are facing hostility.
- Dr. Anthony Fauci wants to start developing vaccines against viruses that could cause the next pandemic.

### Tokyo Olympics

Katie Ledecky of the U.S. and Ariarne Titmus of Australia in the women's 400-meter freestyle final. Doug Mills/The New York Times

- Teenagers swept the women's skateboarding medals. The U.S. swimmer Katie Ledecky lost the 400-meter freestyle to Ariarne Titmus of Australia. Here's the medal count.
- Here's what Times's photographers captured in Tokyo.
- Jordan, Vietnam and other countries that field relatively few athletes have turned to taekwondo to win medals.
- Italy and pizza. Norway and salmon. Romania and Count Dracula. A South Korean broadcaster apologized for airing "inappropriate" images during the opening ceremony.

## Climate

- China didn't take climate change into account during its economic boom. Now it has to.
- Toyota, having bet on hybrid cars, is working to delay a full transition to electric vehicles.
- Here's the latest on wildfires and extreme heat in the U.S.

# Other Big Stories

Eric Adams speaking with reporters last week. Jose A. Alvarado Jr. for The New York Times

- Democrats are looking to Eric Adams, the party's nominee for New York City mayor, as a model for how to discuss crime and police reform.
- Representative Nancy Mace denounced Donald Trump. Then she pivoted, reflecting how rank-and-file Republicans have decided it's too perilous to challenge him.
- Businesses are happy to keep using QR codes — and the tracking they allow.
- Facebook's next target: Your religious experience.

## Opinions

**Gail Collins** and **Bret Stephens** discuss the committee investigating Jan. 6.

“My uncle died of Covid-19 before he could get a vaccine in Kenya,” CNN’s **Larry Madowo** writes. “This is what vaccine inequality looks like.”



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## MORNING READS

**Cubs:** A grizzly bear survival program — for the bears.

**Fisherwomen in Nigeria:** “You want to kill us with your oil.”

**A Times classic:** Here’s a better morning routine.

**Quiz time:** The average score on our most recent news quiz is 7.4 out of 11. Can you beat that?

**Lives Lived:** Bob Moses gained a reputation for extraordinary calm in the face of violence as he helped register voters and trained a generation of civil rights activists in Mississippi in the early 1960s. He died at 86.

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## ARTS AND IDEAS

Jason Sudeikis in “Ted Lasso.” Apple TV Plus, via Associated Press

### The rise of ‘sincere TV’

How has television changed over the past two decades? The Times’s James Poniewozik has a theory: Irony, drama and cringe comedy have given way to sincerity. The ur-example, he argues, is the shift from David Brent — the self-centered, vulgar boss of the British series “The Office” — to Ted Lasso, the earnest hero of the comedy now in its second season.

In a time of plague and polarization, James suggests, “sincerity may be a better cultural fit.” Read the rest of the story. — *Ian Prasad Philbrick, a Morning writer*

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## **PLAY, WATCH, EAT**

### **What to Cook**

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times

This salad is soft and crunchy, and has only five ingredients.

### **What to watch**

HBO’s “Tig Notaro: Drawn” helps audiences laugh at stories that might otherwise make them recoil.

## Anatomy of a Scene

Watch Scarlett Johansson and Florence Pugh spar in “Black Widow.”

## Now Time to Play

The pangram from Friday’s Spelling Bee was *deductive*. Here is today’s puzzle — or you can play online.

Here’s today’s Mini Crossword, and a clue: Carve in stone (four letters).

If you’re in the mood to play more, find all our games here.

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***Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. — David***

P.S. Lauren Few proposed to Taylor Hollenkamp through this newsletter. They were married on the sixth anniversary of the Supreme Court’s marriage-equality ruling.

Here’s today’s print front page.

On the Book Review podcast, Elisabeth Egan discusses a heartbreaking new novel.

*Claire Moses, Ian Prasad Philbrick and Tom Wright-Piersanti contributed to The Morning. You can reach the team at [themorning@nytimes.com](mailto:themorning@nytimes.com).*

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