

Why going for herd immunity to fight COVID won't work

The idea of abandoning preventive measures and letting the virus infect people has already gotten traction in [US] administration. [Recently, a top Trump medical adviser Scott] Atlas moved to ease up on the most important strategy to fight the virus—widespread [testing](#)—by telling the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to [change its guidelines](#) to advise against testing asymptomatic people. On [August 31], the president [referenced](#) the concept in an appearance on Fox News, explaining, “Once you get to a certain number—we use the word herd—once you get to a certain number, it’s going to go away.”

But “herd-immunity strategy” is a contradiction in terms, in that herd immunity is the absence of a strategy.

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I talked with Howard Forman, a health-policy professor at Yale University.

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[Forman:] There’s never been a real case of herd immunity through infection. [Katharine] Wells: For any disease ever?

Forman: Correct. In fact, the term itself didn’t arise until just a few decades ago, when we had vaccination programs. There are cases where, as large waves of infection passed through communities, you had lower levels of outbreak in most years, and then you would have epidemic outbreaks other years. That probably is the closest thing, but that’s not herd immunity. You’re still having outbreaks all the time. You’re just having bigger waves and smaller waves.

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