After a vaccine or infection, how long will immunity to COVID last? It could be years, hopeful new data suggest

Eight months after infection, most people who have recovered still have enough immune cells to fend off the virus and prevent illness, the new data show. A slow rate of decline in the short term suggests, happily, that these cells may persist in the body for a very, very long time to come.

The research, published online, has not been peer-reviewed nor published in a scientific journal. But it is the most comprehensive and long-ranging study of immune memory to the coronavirus to date.

“That amount of memory would likely prevent the vast majority of people from getting hospitalized disease, severe disease, for many years,” said Shane Crotty, a virologist at the La Jolla Institute of Immunology who co-led the new study.

The findings are likely to come as a relief to experts worried that immunity to the virus might be short-lived, and that vaccines might have to be administered repeatedly to keep the pandemic under control.

And the research squares with another recent finding: that survivors of SARS, caused by another coronavirus, still carry certain important immune cells 17 years after recovering.

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Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale University, said she was not surprised that the body mounts a long-lasting response because “that’s what is supposed to happen.” Still, she was heartened by the research: “This is exciting news.”

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