

‘Omicron has started to splinter’: Winter COVID wave may come with a ‘dizzying barrage’ of new variants

The last big variant of concern — the hypertransmissible Omicron offshoot known as BA.5 — peaked in July. Since then, reported U.S. cases have plummeted by 70%. While far too many Americans are still dying of COVID each day — nearly 400, on average — the rate has returned to pre-BA.5 lows. It’s a moment of relative calm.

But under the surface, something new — and potentially dangerous for the most vulnerable among us — has been happening: Omicron has started to “[splinter](#).”

As a result, we may be entering the next phase of the pandemic. Thanks to layers of immunity from vaccination and prior infection — plus lifesaving treatments such as Paxlovid — we will almost certainly never regress to the horrific era of collapsing ICUs and thousands of deaths per day.

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Instead, what scientists are seeing now is a bunch of worrisome Omicron descendants arising simultaneously but independently in different corners of the globe — all with the same set of advantageous mutations that help them dodge our existing immune defenses and drive new waves of infection.

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Finally, the fact that the virus is suddenly evolving in the same evasive direction everywhere at once suggests that most of the world should brace for impact sooner rather than later, regardless of which new sublineage happens to reach our particular patch of the planet. There are plenty of escape variants to go around.

[This is an excerpt. Read the full article here](#)