6 things we learned from the first two COVID-19 waves

Hindsight is 20/20 and, in the case of COVID-19, hindsight is also 2021. So what have we learned from the first and second COVID-19 waves?

With a third COVID-19 wave looming and the new, more infectious SARS-CoV-2 variant (the virus that causes COVID-19) now dominant in South Africa, even those who had the original virus are not sufficiently protected. This is because the new variant has the ability to escape our antibodies (we produce antibodies in response to an infection to help us fight it). Other new variants could also emerge in the coming months and this could have an impact on the effectiveness of the vaccines in protecting us if we don't act now.

We have the power to minimise the impact and severity of a third wave, as well as the likelihood of future variants of the virus. Here are the six lessons we know now that we can use to play our part.

1. The best way to prevent an infection remains unchanged - wearing a mask, frequently washing our hands and social distancing

It's astonishing to think that it's been more than a year since the pandemic first hit. It's also understandable that everyone is keen to get back to how life was before the time of COVID. However, the best way to do this is to comply with the prevention measures. Wearing a mask is still one of the best methods of defense to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through respiratory droplets in talking, coughing and sneezing. Both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization recommend cloth masks because there is clear evidence that indicates masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

2. Any event, even a small intimate gathering with a few friends at home, can be a superspreader event

Superspreader events are not necessarily large gatherings like bars and parties. We may have incorrectly assumed that superspreader events are any gathering of people where prevention measures are difficult to adhere to, and that we are safer in smaller groups. However, any event can be a superspreader if half of the participants contract COVID-19. Your level of infection risk depends on a few factors including:

1. The number of people attending
2. Whether the event is inside or outside
3. How many people will be there?
4. Whether social distancing will be possible
5. The duration of potential exposure (how long you are in contact with others)
6. High-contact surfaces, e.g., bar counters or salt and pepper shakers at a restaurant
7. Whether the event takes place in a hotspot area where the number of COVID-19 infections is on the rise.

If you are unsure about attending an event, why not run the activity through our checklist to help you recognise the 3Vs and 3Cs of a superspreader. Keep yourself and loved ones safe - avoid gatherings, especially where there is singing, loud talking and deep breathing such as dancing or other exercise, because the virus is spread mainly through respiratory droplets.

3. Alcohol restrictions and curfews help to increase hospital capacity

During the first and second wave, the government implemented either a complete alcohol ban or restrictions on the hours and days of alcohol sales. Restricted alcohol sales and night-time curfews are there to prevent unnecessary pressure on our hospitals, in particular our trauma and intensive care units (ICU). This is because binge-drinking often leads to reckless behaviour, including a relaxation of prevention measures such as mask wearing and social distancing. It can also lead to more reckless behaviours such as driving under the influence of alcohol or violent incidents. In President Cyril Ramaphosa's address on 24 April, he stated: "There is now clear evidence that the resumption of alcohol sales has resulted in substantial pressure being put on hospitals, including trauma and ICU units ... Most of these occur at night." There is also evidence that alcohol bans have reduced alcohol-related hospital admissions by as much as 50%.

4. We need two thirds of the population to be vaccinated to reach a "critical mass"

We need to reach population immunity to reassess when life can go back to what it was pre-COVID-19. Population immunity is when a large portion of the population is immune to the virus, making the spread of the disease from one person to another much less likely. By the time the third wave hits South Africa, only a small percentage of healthcare workers and individuals 60 years of age and over will have been vaccinated. Government states that. "At this stage, we are encouraging anyone 60 or over to register for their vaccination on the national Electronic Vaccination Database System (EVDS)," says Dr Noluthando Nematswerani, "and if they are members of medical schemes we administer, or Discovery clients, to also register on the Discovery Vaccination Portal to get in line for their vaccine." We also need to assist our elderly loved ones who may not be digitally savvy to register.

5. Monitoring hotspots and contact tracing is essential to manage the spread

When someone tests positive for the disease, it's important to let those with whom they have been in close contact with over the past 14 days know in case they have also contracted the disease but are not yet experiencing symptoms. The problem is that people who contract COVID-19 will never remember, let alone be able to provide contact details for strangers they were close to on public transport or at a social event. The COVID Alert SA app overcomes this simply by keeping a digital memory of the time that smartphones using the app have spent near each other, through Bluetooth signals, which we all use daily to connect to Bluetooth-enabled devices. The identity of the smartphone user is never required. This ensures that individuals who are at risk can take extra precautionary measures (such as self-quarantine for exposure or self-isolation if they start to show symptoms of COVID-19 after being exposed), to ensure that they do not expose others.

South Africa's National Department of Health developed the mobile Bluetooth contact-tracing app for COVID-19. Called COVID Alert SA, it can anonymously track who an individual has been in proximity to, and for how long, to determine their risk of exposure. The app then alerts all affected users if any of them records a positive test result in the app.

Download COVID Alert SA App today.

The power is in your hands.

6. COVID-19 has brought the importance of mental health to the forefront

The pandemic is undoubtedly affecting our daily routine and how we fulfil our work responsibilities. "Running a home, cooking, cleaning, looking after the kids, trying to stay in a work routine, getting interrupted while working, getting used to online meetings and freezing screens, resisting the urge to be online and available all the time and switching off at the end of the day. Sound familiar? The current environment we find ourselves in is not normal by any stretch of the imagination and definitely enough to make anybody feel stressed," says psychiatrist Professor Christoffel Grobler.

According to a Psychiatrist Prof Grobler, up to one in four females and one in six males will, in a lifetime, have a depressive episode, and one in five people will have an anxiety disorder. However, less than 50% of people with an anxiety disorder will actually get treatment. These are staggering statistics, and are likely to be compounded by retrenchments, the loss of friends and family members to COVID-19 and the anxiety of a potential or actual COVID-19 diagnosis. Now, more than ever, it's important to reach out to a mental health professional if you have heightened anxiety, feelings of depression or even feelings of guilt, shame or isolation. You can reach out to a counsellor, therapist, SADAG helpline or your doctor.