‘Stealthy’ new Covid variant can reinfect you every month

Health experts across the globe are signalling alarm as they begin reporting that Omicron BA.5, the coronavirus strain that is currently outpacing other variants in infection and has become the dominant strain in the US and abroad, has the ability to reinfect people within weeks of contracting the virus.

Andrew Roberston, the chief health officer in Western Australia, told News.com.au that though previously the wisdom held that most people would retain a certain level of protection against reinfection if they were vaccinated or had retained some level of natural immunity due to a
infected after four weeks,” the doctor explained during an interview with the Australian news outlet. “So maybe six to eight weeks they are developing a second infection, and that’s almost certainly BA.4 or BA.5.”

The ability for strains BA.4 and BA.5 to reinfect individuals who would in previous waves of Covid-19 had stronger immunity has led some experts to start calling this latest strain the most transmissible yet.

“They’re taking over, so clearly they’re more contagious than earlier variants of omicron,” said David Montefiori, a professor at the Human Vaccine Institute at Duke University Medical Center, in an interview with NBC News.

Federal estimates released by the Center for Diseases Control and Prevention on Tuesday show that BA.5 has now overtaken as the dominant strain in the US, accounting for approximately 54 per cent of cases for the week ending on 2 July 2022.

And though the average number of new cases that the US records each day has steadily hovered at around 95,000 to 115,000, according to data from The New York Times, experts fear that a combination of home testers not reporting positive cases, a closure of government-funded testing centres and an uptick in states stopping their daily data updates has led to a less accurate picture of how much this new strain is actually penetrating the nation.

A study published in Science last week has confirmed the troubling reality that many may have already been experiencing anecdotally with multiple back-to-back reinfections: these two new subvariants evade protection from previous infections and vaccines.

Immunology professor Danny Altmann, a co-author who penned the Science paper alongside Rosemary Boyton, a professor of immunology and respiratory medicine, discussed the findings from their research in a recent op-ed. They noted that, contrary to a popular held belief that
individuals who were triple vaxxed and those who suffered breakthrough infections during earlier Omicron waves.

“This lets us examine whether Omicron was, as some hoped, a benign natural booster of our Covid immunity,” he wrote in The Guardian. “It turns out that isn’t the case.”

“Most people – even when triple-vaccinated – had 20 times less neutralising antibody response against Omicron than against the initial ‘Wuhan’ strain,” Mr Altmann said, noting that, importantly, “Omicron infection was a poor booster of immunity to further Omicron infections”.

“It is a kind of stealth virus that gets in under the radar,” he said, emphasising that “even having had Omicron, we’re not well protected from further infections”.

Mr Altmann’s research seems to confirm other recent studies that have been released in recent weeks that warn of the new subvariants’ ability to evade protection from previous immune-building precautions; namely vaccination and natural immunity.

Research published in Nature out of Columbia University, a study that has yet to be peer reviewed, suggests that BA.4 and BA.5 are four times more resistant to antibodies from vaccines than BA.2, a subvariant that became the dominant strain in the US in April, replacing the original strain that had driven the winter wave across the country.

Though experts believe that these current strains will likely fuel new waves, they did note that vaccines will provide partial immunity and can still protect against potentially more severe infections.

“Our data suggest that these new Omicron subvariants will likely be able to lead to surges of infections in populations with high levels of vaccine immunity as well as natural BA1 and BA2 immunity,” said Dr Dan Barouch to CNN. “It is
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which found that there was a three-fold reduction
neutralising antibodies from vaccines and infection against
BA.4 and BA.5, which was substantially lower than BA.1 and
BA2.

Because of this, vaccines that many received in the past 18
months will likely need not only a boost, but an update.

The Federal Drug Administration recommended last week
that Covid-19 vaccine makers, namely Pfizer and Moderna,
begin modifying what they currently have on offer so that
their booster shots can more accurately target the BA.4
and BA.5 variants and estimated that these shots could
become available as early as mid-fall.