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We are in the throes BA.5, a fast and furious variant of the covid virus, spreading at lightning speed. In Wyoming, however, scarcely anyone takes note.

All viruses, including SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, change over time, says the website of the World Health Organization. Most changes have little impact, but some changes help the virus spread quickly and easily.

BA.5 is such a one. BA.5 is now the most prevalent coronavirus across the country, with worrisome numbers of hospitalizations and intensive-care admissions.

At the Wheatland physical therapy building I frequent, practically all clients enter without wearing a mask, including the elderly who, I'd think, would want to keep infections at bay. Staff no longer mask up, either--except that, when I wear a mask, whoever works with me quickly grabs a mask and dons it.

My neighbor, in physical therapy after knee surgery but at another institution in Wheatland, tells me, masks are required where he goes. "Because the building is affiliated with the hospital," he says.

So I said to my therapist, "You guys are pretty casual about mask wearing."  
I know him to be the head honcho of the joint.

"Headquarters tells us to mask up only if a client wears a mask, that's all," he said.

I imagine the corporation wants to save the time and expense. Guess where you're more likely to pick up the virus, in my neighbor's therapy building or in mine?

My cousin in Germany has asked if her adoptive daughter could visit for a month, "to get fluent in English ahead of her exams," adding, "promise not to speak German with her."

"No problem about speaking English only," I said. "You should know, though, the B5 Omicron variant is holding America in its grip."

"Same here," she said. "And people are tired of isolation. It's been more than two years."

I told her B.5 is more vaccine-resistant than any previous variants. It is also highly contagious. Vaccines still provide protection against being on a ventilator or in a hospital, dying; still even some of my vaccinated-and-boosted family members were hit hard, with vomiting, fever, and sore throats so severe, they couldn't eat anything for a couple of days.

I mentioned that some unvaccinated neighbors came away relatively unscathed from a brush with BA.5. Then again, I know some unvaccinated Wyomingites who were hit hard.

The new variant is speedy and stealthy and has little trouble infecting and reinfecting people, even those who have already encountered the virus before, or been vaccinated against it, or both. This makes transmission impossible to contain.

“She’s careful with social distancing and masking up,” said my cousin of the young woman she and her husband adopted after caring for her for years as foster parents.

“She needs to select a nonstop flight,” I advised. “And go with Lufthansa. Here, the airlines no longer enforce mask-wearing.”

A few days later my cousin called to say that Lufthansa, like the American airlines, are canceling hundreds of flights. A friend with a Lufthansa ticket told her that an airline functionary called to say her flight was canceled. “He apologized and refunded her money.”

“A friend of mine had plans to fly to Spain on Delta,” I said. “She changed her mind after hearing that the Delta pilots went on strike. They’d been forced to fly without a break, and it got too much.”

“Heathrow airport in London just announced they won’t sell any more flight tickets until September,” said my cousin. “It’s pandemonium. Ticket holders stranded for days, business and leisure travelers alike, forced to sleep in airport chairs or on the floor.”

Earlier this summer my son took wife and daughter on a Disneyland visit. They had postponed the plan from spring break, and drove to avoid possible infections during air travel. Driving ate up extra days; worse, after returning home they tested positive for Covid. Walter wore a mask on the Disney premises, he said, but wife and daughter didn’t.

In the United States, reported cases have been averaging around 100,000 per day. That figure is likely underreported because mass testing sites have closed. People rely on at-home testing, as my son’s family did after returning from Disneyland and feeling unwell.

Pathogens don’t spread without first inhabiting a host. But with masks, distancing, travel restrictions, and other protective measures almost entirely gone, “we’ve given the virus every opportunity to keep doing this,” states a viral immunologist. President Biden’s coronavirus response team has warned that we must do more to protect ourselves against “a new wave of infections, re-infections and hospitalizations across the country.”

And the Government Accountability Office said in a statement that the pandemic “highlights how unprepared the U.S. public health and aviation systems are to respond to public health threats.”

Some people are getting the virus for the first time, others for the second or third, sometimes just a few weeks apart. The World Health Organization has announced that, with cases rising significantly across the globe, the pandemic remains a public health emergency. Worse, the variants may not stop anytime soon.

I am not taking any chances. Forget summer travel; I'm staying put. When I do venture out, you'll find me wearing a mask. Let people smirk. I'd rather not fall ill.