If I Have Antibodies, Should I Still Get the Vaccine?
Author: Dr. Matthew Wonnacott - Chief Medical Officer

We've been living with the COVID-19 pandemic now for 19 months and many of us either know someone who has been infected or have contracted the virus ourselves.

For those of us who have been infected, it's tempting to assume that antibodies caused by the virus will protect us in the future and we can therefore forgo a vaccine. That's understandable, and the science is still evolving regarding the protection offered by antibodies vs a vaccine. But the most reputable researchers and physicians at leading medical institutions say it's important to consider a few things while contemplating this deeply personal decision.

First, antibodies from an infection may protect you, but for how long is unclear. A positive antibody test does not necessarily mean you are immune from a COVID-19 infection. A UCLA study showed people with mild cases of COVID-19 saw antibodies drop sharply over the first three months post-infection, decreasing by roughly half every 36 days. As protection decreases, the chance of re-infection increases.

While we are still learning about the immunity of those who have had COVID-19, we know the protection is not as strong as those who have been vaccinated. Early information indicates it may take multiple infections to equal the immunity of the vaccine.

Results from the authorized COVID-19 antibody tests also should not be used to evaluate a person's level of immunity or protection from COVID-19 at any time, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The FDA cautions that if you have not been vaccinated, be aware that a positive result from an antibody test does not mean you have enough immunity to protect you from COVID-19.

Second, just as the presence of antibodies does not ensure immunity, it also does not indicate that one can't infect others. We don't yet know how long such antibody protection will last, how strong it is and how it varies based on the individual and their infection. While the choice to vaccinate is a personal decision, that decision could impact those around us, especially those who are unable to receive the vaccination.

Finally, mutations are inevitable, but potentially accelerated where unvaccinated pockets of the population exist. More vaccines in arms means slowing the spread and therefore slowing mutations that can become more harmful.

The Delta variant, for example, is much more contagious than other variations of COVID-19 and is causing infections across all ages, in both vaccinated and unvaccinated people. But those without the vaccine are primarily the ones winding up in hospitals and unfortunately, they're also the ones experiencing long-term symptoms at higher rates or even dying.

Vaccinations are widely available at physician offices as well as local pharmacies and are proven to be safe and effective. Individuals with symptoms or possible or exposures should contact their primary care provider's office for guidance.

Receiving the COVID-19 vaccination continues to be the best defense against transmitting the disease as well as providing more robust protection for individuals, families and communities even if you have antibodies from a previous infection.

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Dr. Matthew Wonnacott is Chief Medical Officer at Barton Health. To learn more about the COVID-19 vaccine or what to do if you're feeling symptoms or have been exposed, visit **BartonHealth.org/Coronavirus**.