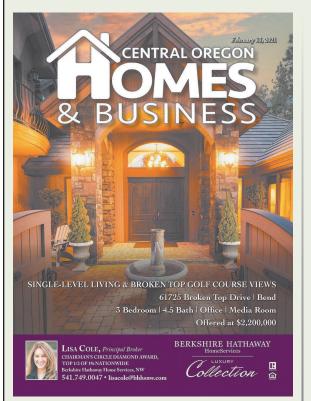


COVID-19 | Number of infections Could recent brutal surge get us to herd immunity?

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AND RONG-GONG LIN II Los Angeles Times

As coronavirus cases plummet nationwide and vaccinations total 1.7 million Americans a day and rising, health experts are increasingly striking a new tone in their pandemic assessments: optimism.

"I could be wrong, but I don't think we're going to see a big fourth surge," said Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine expert at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "I think we've seen the worst of it." Many epidemiologists and

Many epidemiologists and other scientists, while still cautious, say they feel increasingly hopeful the rest of 2021 will not replay the nightmare of last year.

The arrival of spring will likely aid the ongoing precipitous drop in coronavirus cases, as warmer weather allows people to spend more time outdoors and creates a less hospitable environment for the virus, experts say.

But the biggest factor, paradoxically, is something the nation spent the last year trying to prevent.

While 12% of Americans have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, far more people — approximately 35% of the nation's population — have already been infected with the coronavirus, Offit estimated. Studies have found that people who survive COVID-19 have immunity for several months, though it likely lasts even longer.

University of California, San Francisco, epidemiologist Dr. George Rutherford said one of the reasons cases are dropping so fast in California "is because of naturally acquired immunity, mostly in Southern California." He estimated that 50% of Los Angeles County residents have been infected with the virus at some point.

"We're really talking some-

thing starting to sound and look like herd immunity — although that true herd immunity is a ways off in the future," Rutherford said recently.

What is herd immunity?

Herd immunity is reached when so many people have immunity that a virus cannot find new hosts and stops spreading, resulting in communitywide protection. Scientists believe that in the case of the coronavirus, the threshold could be as high as 90%. The United States has not met this threshold, but each step toward it slows transmission, experts say.

The effects may be greatest in places that endured the worst COVID-19 surges, including Los Angeles. After a horrific autumn and winter wave that has killed more than 12,000 people, an estimated 33% to 55% of L.A. County residents have already been infected with the coronavirus, according to USC researchers.

Those past infections have blunted transmission of the coronavirus so significantly that they have changed the current trajectory of the outbreak in the county, where new daily cases have been falling for five weeks, said Dr. Roger Lewis, director of COVID-19 hospital demand modeling for the L.A. County Department of Health Services. "If you had the exact same

"If you had the exact same behavior and type of virus circulating that we have right now, but we were at the beginning of the pandemic and no one was immune yet ... we'd be in the midst of an ongoing surge," he said. "The fact that cases are going down right now, as opposed to going up, is because approximately a third of everybody in Los Angeles County is immune to COVID."

But experts caution that the battle is not yet won.

New coronavirus variants could undermine these projec-

resistant to existing vaccines or by finding a way to spread more easily. Shifts in behavior could also render this good news moot, as it holds only if people stick to the precautions they have been taking thus far, experts say.

"I don't want to provide a false sense of assurance here," said L.A. County chief science officer Dr. Paul Simon. "Unless they've had vaccination, they continue to be susceptible. I think we need to continue to be vigilant."

Nationwide, coronavirus cases have dropped to levels not seen since late October, according to federal officials. Since the pandemic began, nearly 30 million Americans have tested positive for the coronavirus, but the true number who have contracted the virus is likely three or four times higher due to low levels of testing and the fact that many people who are infected never develop symptoms, experts say.

The large number of infections has come at a high cost. Allowing COVID-19 to run rampant to quickly achieve herd immunity, as some had promoted early in the pandemic, would have led to even more deaths and chronic health problems, experts say.

It remains unclear exactly what the threshold for herd immunity is with this virus, with some scientists estimating that it may be achieved when 50% of people are immune, while others believe the threshold is closer to 90%, Simon said. The uneven geographical distribution of infections may also leave some pockets of the county more vulnerable than others, he said.

"We don't know quite yet what level of vaccination and protection would be required to get herd immunity across (L.A.) county," Simon said Friday.

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