

Opinion

Covid is still a deadly threat in Britain - we can't just pretend it's gone away

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Without a plan in place to minimise infection, a 'moving on' strategy leaves vulnerable people behind

As the season of Christmas work parties and drinks with friends begins, it feels a distance from the December of two years ago, at the height of the pandemic. We will hug our grandparents, hardly remembering a time when that was anything remarkable. Perhaps that's why the news that Covid infections in the UK have [passed 1m cases](#) again has barely raised a murmur.

Months of lockdowns and the grief of losing our loved ones, often without being able to say goodbye, was a collective trauma, and one that we have not dealt with as a nation. The ease of Matt Hancock's [rehabilitation](#) suggests a public keen to bury the pain, keep calm and carry on. There is a noticeable – and understandable – urge to “move on” from the pandemic, even as it still happens around us. Ministers hardly help, talking of “post-Covid” just as ICU beds fill up again.

The result is a surreal climate of denial. Think about how it's become the new normal to fall ill with Covid-19 over and over again, despite research linking [repeated infections](#) to long-term health problems including heart disease. Many people who are clinically vulnerable to dying from Covid are still at least semi-shielding at home, forced to miss going the pub with friends or a simple trip to the shops, while the media and politicians look the other way. Meanwhile, 2 million people in the UK have [developed long Covid](#), and have been left to endure debilitating symptoms and, in some cases, permanent disability.

That's not to mention the impact of mass infection on the ever more fragile economy. People with long Covid having to leave work is said to be a key reason why the number of economically inactive over-50s has recently [shot up](#). Then there's the burden of a workforce repeatedly getting sick. Just look at how Covid among NHS workers has been adding to the already crippling staff shortages in hospitals. The NHS we sought to protect during lockdowns has quickly been forgotten.

After almost three years, it's natural that “rule fatigue” would set in. The unprecedented constraints of lockdowns has created a fear of going back there. Partygate, meanwhile, chipped away at public trust in following rules the rule-makers themselves flouted. But living with the virus does not require living with restrictions – just some smart strategies.

Take improving ventilation in public buildings. Other than belatedly fitting CO₂ monitors in English schools, [campaigners say](#) the government has had a “negligent” approach to ventilating schools. With the chilly Christmas season seeing an increase in socialising indoors, as it stands at the moment the government seemingly can't even stretch to a public health campaign to advise people to open a window.

Face masks are proven to be one of the [best ways to prevent spreading Covid](#) but are a rarity now, with even some healthcare workers ditching PPE around vulnerable patients. The politicisation of mask-wearing means a sensible strategy has become increasingly difficult to maintain. Disabled people on social media report being accosted by strangers for “still” wearing a mask, as if the sight of a piece of cloth is reminder of a time they’d prefer to forget. New York officials have just urged residents to [wear masks](#) in crowded spaces again, and there’s no logical reason our own leaders shouldn’t do the same. The message from ministers can be simple but powerful : one small action from you can save a clinically vulnerable person’s life.

Winter boosters are another key line of defence, but the government needs to tackle ongoing concerns over low uptake, particularly [among elderly people](#). Tell everyone that [Covid is over](#) enough times, and it’s hardly a surprise some aren’t rushing for a vaccination. Then there’s the decision to stop offering jabs to the general population. The Treasury might [prefer to prioritise](#) those at high risk, carers and health staff, but it leads to a bizarre situation where someone who is under 50 can be in regular contact with, say, a colleague with a lung transplant and still not be eligible even for a paid-for jab. It’s currently possible to pop into Boots to buy a flu jab – but not a Covid booster. That should surely change.

Crucially, the approximately 500,000 immunocompromised people who get little or no protection from vaccines need access to regular antibody treatment. Unlike in more than 30 other countries, including the US, the UK government has so far refused to make [Evusheld](#) available on the NHS, citing “insufficient data”, despite [fierce opposition](#) from charities and clinicians. Expecting hundreds of thousands of people to just stay indoors indefinitely, or risk their lives by going to work, is no sort of plan.

As the country reels from increased energy bills, strikes and strained public services, the tendency to forget Covid is to be expected. It is the political norm nowadays for nothing to be dealt with, instead to lurch from one crisis to the next. But “moving on” without any strategies in place comes at a cost. There has always been a great irony in ignoring Covid : it is only by thinking about preventive measures that we will be able to actually forget it. In the coming weeks, the [coronavirus inquiry](#) may offer a chance to finally have an honest conversation about the pandemic – the losses, mistakes and lessons. As a nation, that conversation is long overdue.

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P.-S.

- The Guardian. Tue 13 Dec 2022 11.13 GMT :
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