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Testing remains priority amidst vaccination to mitigate pandemic

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Along with vaccine rollout, testing on a broader scale needs to continue till COVID-19 becomes an endemic



As the rate of COVID-19 infections begin to slow down gradually it seems that the world is slowly returning to normalcy. Mass vaccinations have played a crucial role in bringing down infections. As a result, the reported COVID-19 cases are seemingly dwindling. Many are viewing this as the end of the pandemic. However, it is essential to note that vaccine manufacturers and the government stress that vaccine is a preventive measure but not a cure for COVID-19.

While vaccines are known to significantly reduce the chances of severe infection, vaccinated individuals can still 'catch' the virus and serve as silent carriers of the disease. Given that SARS-CoV-2 has reached all corners of the world and will continue to mutate over time, it is most likely that COVID-19 will continue to cause outbreaks of mild- to moderate respiratory disease, potentially with a seasonal pattern similar to influenza.

“Injectable vaccines only protect the lower lung and not the upper lung. So, the possibility of getting infected by COVID-19 even after getting the two doses of a vaccine is not completely ruled out”, explains **Dr Krishna Ella, Chairman & Managing Director, Bharat Biotech.**

If preventive measures like masks and social distancing are not followed, this can lead to severe outbreaks where the source of infection is extremely difficult to detect. This is because vaccinated people will most likely be asymptomatic and inadvertently spread COVID-19. We are currently seeing this in many countries where spikes in cases are being seen, driven primarily by the Delta variant of the virus.

According to **Dr Soumya Swaminathan, Chief Scientist, World Health Organisation (WHO)**, “We're very confident now that all the vaccines that have received emergency use listing from WHO prevent severe disease and hospitalization due to all the existing variants of SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, we still believe that taking the personal precautions like wearing a mask, maintaining distance, maintaining hand hygiene and avoiding crowded and closed places, as well as the other public health and social measures that governments have put in place are necessary.”

Despite vaccinations, we need to mitigate the pandemic until there is a proven cure for the disease or until adequate vaccinations significantly lower the prevalence of COVID-19. Lockdowns and public health measures have slowed down transmission all over the world and more infection waves will force communities into lockdowns again, but at a great cost to personal lives and to the economy.

“Surveillance and testing efforts will continue to play a significant role in managing the pandemic as we gradually get back to normalcy. Concerns related to emergence of new variants that could possibly evade protection offered by vaccines or prove to be more transmissible are other factors that reinforce the need for reliable and sensitive testing. PCR based tests remain the gold standard, whether infected or not, the need for accurate testing and scalable diagnostic capabilities will be a vital step in curbing the spread of the virus. The pandemic has taught the world a lot about infectious disease management and COVID-19 tests will possibly be a part of all future ‘pandemic playbooks’, says **Amit Chopra, Managing Director, India and South Asia, Thermo Fisher Scientific.**

Quoting a similar thought on the need to continuing accurate testing, **Dr Sangita Reddy, Joint Managing Director, Apollo Hospitals Group** says, “Widespread testing will enable quick identification, immediate isolation, and early treatment to prevent spread. With nearly half of all COVID-19 infections transmitted by people who are asymptomatic, easy and quick tests will go a long way in facilitating the identification of infected individuals who may be asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic. These tests will give a boost to the efforts to mitigate the effect of COVID-19 and will play a major role in controlling the pandemic.”

Along with vaccine rollout, testing on a broader scale needs to continue till COVID-19 becomes an endemic. Healthcare providers will need to distinguish between COVID-19, influenza and other causes of respiratory disease so that patients can be treated and managed effectively. In other words, it’s highly probable that COVID-19 will be with us, at least to some degree, for years to come.