

New COVID-19 variant

Reports: 'Razor blade throat' a common sign



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A new COVID-19 subvariant that led to an increase in cases and hospitalizations in Asia is on the verge of becoming the most dominant version in the United States, federal data shows.

Multiple news reports have linked the subvariant, NB 1.8.1, to "razor blade throat," in part because of postings on social media that likened symptoms to swallowing razor blades. But experts say those scattered anecdotal reports don't mean COVID-19 today is more likely to cause severe throat pain than in the past.

The variant, which some researchers have named Nimbus, made up 37% of all COVID-19 cases nationwide for the two weeks ending June 7, about the same as a variant that had been dominant for months and up from 15% the previous two



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weeks, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data shows. The New York State Department of Health had not detected a significant spread of NB 1.8.1 as of May 31.

But, Dr. Bruce Farber, chief of public health and epidemiology for Northwell Health, said, "It's got to be prevalent. There's no way it's not here."

The health department said in a statement Wednesday that "while there are a few docu-

mented cases of this variant strain in New York, the actual count is difficult to ascertain as many symptomatic people are using over-the-counter tests which are not reportable."

The state testing data that does exist shows that levels of COVID-19 remain low, with the number of reported COVID-19 hospitalizations — 60 on Long Island as of Tuesday — much lower for mid-June than any of the previous



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five summers.

"Not only are they low, but they're not trending up despite the fact this new variant is already dominant or will be dominant soon," Farber said. But, he added, numbers tend to increase during the summer, and "we can't bank on what's going to happen in August."

The increasing predominance of anti-vaccination and vaccine-skeptic voices in the federal government may dissuade people from obtaining vaccinations against the virus, potentially putting "those more vulnerable people — babies, pregnant women, elderly people" at risk of more severe COVID-19, he said. Numbers of those with the most recent vac-

cine already are low.

Almost everyone has had COVID-19 or received a vaccine, so our bodies have built up some protection, said Dr. Aaron Glatt, chairman of medicine and chief of infectious diseases at Mount Sinai South Nassau in Oceanside. But any changes in the virus bring a risk of greater contagiousness because the body "doesn't recognize the virus as well" and may not be able to fight it as effectively, he said.

The reports of severe throat pain were accompanied by a spike in online searches for "razor blade throat," according to Google Trends.

But some people who contracted COVID-19 in previous years also reported painful sore throats, and "there is no evidence whatsoever that [NB 1.8.1] is more virulent" than previous variants, Glatt said. The virus affects people in different ways, he said.

At Melville-based Allied Physicians Group, which has 25 Long Island locations, there have been some kids with COVID-19 with sore throats, said Dr. Eric Levene, a regional medical director.

"But I can't honestly say it's any worse than any other viral sore throat by my anecdotal reporting," he said.

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