

## Hybrid immunity gives protection

The Statesman



Founder Executive Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bibinagar, Dr. Vikas Bhatia

On a mission to establish the new Institute of national importance, founder Executive Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bibinagar, Dr. Vikas Bhatia embarked on a journey by road to Telangana during the lockdown in 2020. Since then, he has been working day and night to provide premier health care to people there. In an interview with Ajita Singh, Dr Bhatia talks about Covid19 and its new variant, Omicron.

Excerpts:

Q. Is the human body naturally equipped to fight infections?

A: The human body can ward off many infections on its own with its innate immunity. Besides, it develops immunity against contagions after exposure to them. Some pathogens have the potential to cause severe disease, disability, and even death. Vaccines help the body develop robust immunity against such contagions.

Q. Why did people all over the world suffer immensely from SARS-Cov2?

A: During the last two years, SARS-Cov-2 has claimed millions of lives. India too suffered a devastating second wave that affected millions of people across the country. Post this wave, India now has a huge proportion of the population that has developed

what we call ‘hybrid immunity’, a combination of immunity developed after exposure to the viral infection and vaccination. Studies show this form of immunity can provide greater protection against Covid-19. In fact, it has also been observed that people who were exposed to the infection and then took one dose of the vaccine also have developed a fairly good level of immunity against the virus.

Q. What percentage of the Indian population do you think has innate immunity?

A: Recent national sero survey shows that more than 80 per cent of the population of the country, including children, have antibodies against Covid-19. The vaccination statistics show that more than 90 per cent of adults have received the first dose of vaccine and about half the country’s adult population is now fully vaccinated.

Q. There are reports that even fully vaccinated people are getting Covid infections. Your opinion.

A: This hybrid immunity in the population can protect it against severe disease caused by the virus, including new mutants.

Q. Can we say fully jabbed people in India are protected against Omicron?

A: The Omicron variant, which was first reported in South Africa, is now present in more than 40 countries. The variant has about 30 mutations and is said to be many times more transmissible than the Delta variant, which caused the severe second wave in India and other countries. The Omicron variant has become a cause of great concern across the world, with many countries imposing restrictions and taking severe measures to contain its spread. India too needs to be cautious. The initial evidence, however, suggests that though the virus is highly transmissible, it is not causing severe disease or death. It is so far causing only a milder form of the disease with symptoms such as cold, cough, and mild fever.

Q. Can we say we are safe from Omicron?

A: No. We cannot let our guards down. Countries have been finding innovative ways to protect themselves. For example, in Germany, one cannot enter a restaurant until fully vaccinated. People across the world have also realised the importance of following personal protective measures such as wearing masks, maintaining a safe distance, avoiding overcrowded locations, and sanitising their hands regularly.

Q. When do you feel this pandemic will get over?

A: If the past viral outbreaks are anything to go by, we find that a virus dies its natural death provided we keep ourselves safe and be patient till it does.

Q. Will we win this battle against Coronavirus?

A: I strongly feel that we can win the battle against this deadly virus if we fight it collectively. So, while the government is doing its job by providing vaccines free of cost to the population, preparing the healthcare infrastructure to deal with a sudden surge in the number of patients, and screening those who can be possibly be infected, it is the duty of people to take both the doses of vaccine and follow Covid-Appropriate Behaviour to avoid rapid spread of the disease