

Minnesotan boosts omicron trackers

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Peter McGinn, 30, of Minneapolis, became one of the first people known to be infected with omicron in the United States. McGinn, who was vaccinated, has thankfully only had a "super mild" infection, he said in an interview this week, and was only briefly "out of commission."

McGinn is still marveling about his viral moment, so to speak. He's talked to the New York Times, the Star Tribune and news outlets from Japan and elsewhere. It's important to point out that he didn't have to do this.

Had he not personally granted the media access, his name would have remained confidential. Instead, his commendable openness helped make it clear to others how easily COVID can spread and alerted the entire nation to a new pandemic challenge.

As McGinn pointed out to an editorial writer, he hadn't traveled to South Africa, where omicron was first reported. He'd only been to New York for an anime convention. That he became infected shows this new variant isn't just a threat in far-off places. Its detection here, and McGinn sharing his story, drove home that those who have let their guard down two years into the pandemic need to put it back up, especially with the holidays looming.

McGinn's relatable recounting of his experience also provided an example of what to do if you think you've been infected. From the first moments when he suspected he was ill, he took conscientious steps to protect everyone else. It's worth pointing everything that McGinn did right in hopes that others will follow his laudable lead.

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McGinn knew it was time to take a COVID test. An at-home rapid test came back positive on Nov. 22. He confirmed that result by going to one of the state's community test sites on Nov. 23. A day later, he had his answer. He had COVID, though he didn't know then that he had contracted the new variant.

As much as he wanted to go to his family's Thanksgiving celebration, McGinn quarantined. That was another responsible step. He didn't want to spread the virus to anyone else, but especially to his mother, who is immunocompromised.

Another critical decision that McGinn got right: answering his phone when state health officials reached out. There were two calls, one that was routine after a positive COVID test. The second was to let him know that further analysis revealed he had omicron.

Too often, Minnesotans aren't picking up or cooperating when state health officials call after a positive test, a situation that state Health Commissioner Jan Malcolm has publicly lamented. It's important to take these calls because health officials can help with common questions, such as how long to quarantine.

Information gathered can also help track COVID, and determine if there is a broader risk to the public — such as if a large public event is linked to multiple cases.

McGinn said the case investigators that he spoke to were "super nice" and "very professional." He said he didn't feel any pressure to talk to them. Instead, he wanted to share information to help them do their jobs.

Thanks to McGinn's help, state health officials were able to inform New York City health officials of the potential link between the new variant and the anime convention, which had around 53,000 in attendance. "They were able to use this important information to start their own investigation and alert others who were impacted," the Minnesota Department of Health said in a statement. "Minnesota, New York and many other parts of the country benefited from the positive actions of one Minnesotan doing his part."

McGinn was also a rock-star resource when it came to questions about vaccine effectiveness. He got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and was boosted with Moderna. As he noted with interviewers, vaccination likely prevented serious illness, hospitalization or worse. In his view, it did its job — a message both appropriate and needed.

It's unfortunate that McGinn became infected. But his conscientious response provided a valuable public service at a critical time. Minnesotans should be grateful.