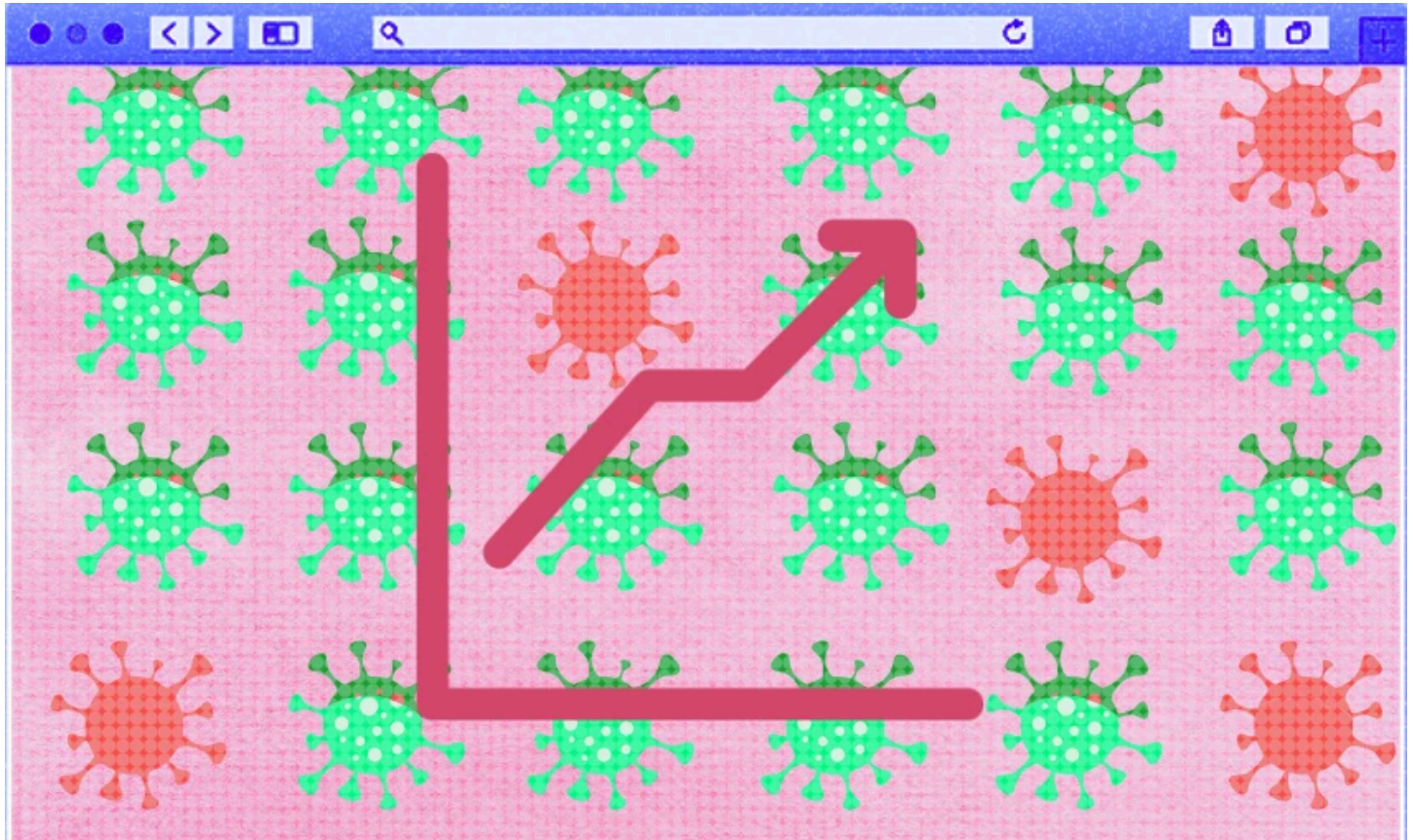


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A ninth wave of the disease is beginning. (Image: The Spinoff)

SOCIETY March 11, 2026

The ninth wave of Covid: What you need to know



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New Covid subvariants are circulating, and hospital admissions are up. Here's how to lower your chances of going down during the ninth wave.

P Last week, 53 people were hospitalised with Covid-19, and wastewater testing is showing increasing levels of the virus in the community. University of Otago epidemiologist Michael Baker says this is a sign that a new wave of Covid – the ninth since the omicron variant first spread in 2022 – is beginning in New Zealand. (Prior to

2022, the virus wasn't circulating widely in New Zealand; after omicron, the virus has followed a pattern of about two waves each year.)

Are hospital admissions and deaths the only way we know what's happening with Covid now?

There are four sources of data about Covid infections. As well as hospitalisations and deaths with Covid, New Zealand tracks self-reported cases of the virus and does wastewater testing. Reporting of deaths can be significantly delayed.

These days, the numbers of self-reported cases are negligible, because very few people are still testing for the virus and even fewer are logging their results online.

Wastewater testing doesn't provide exact numbers, but gives useful information about which variants are circulating and approximately how many people are infected.

NZ's ninth wave of Covid | Now You Know | The Spinoff



Is the ninth wave any different than previous waves?

Yes, slightly, according to Baker: "The wastewater testing shows that there are multiple circulating subvariants, not one dominant variant that's crowding out others". He says that's a sign that rising cases are due to waning immunity.

Am I more protected from Covid now it's been around so long?

You can develop immunity in two ways: by getting sick with Covid, which means your body develops an immune response, but tamps down as time passes, or by getting a vaccine, which exposes you to a weakened version of the virus or teaches your body to make a protein to practise its immune response, preparing for infection without the disadvantages of actually getting sick

Getting a vaccine provides immunity without the risks associated with a Covid infection, including long Covid, when ongoing symptoms like fatigue and breathlessness persist for months. “That will be the largest long-term consequence of the pandemic – tens of thousands of people with a disabling condition,” Baker says. “For some people that gets better over time [...] but there are few if any effective treatments.”

The last Covid wave occurred about six months ago. That’s long enough that people who gained immunity then from being sick may be able to get infected again.

Covid remains a deadly infectious disease, associated with about 1,000 deaths a year in New Zealand – compared to around 500 for influenza.



Covid and flu vaccines are not ‘perfect’ like the MMR shot, but they prevent serious illness. (Image: Tina Tiller)

Is the vaccine effective if there are new subvariants circulating?

“The strains of the virus keep evolving, but the booster vaccine still gives good coverage,” Baker says.

Getting a vaccine makes it less likely that you’ll fall ill, but it’s still possible.

The value of the vaccine is that it protects against serious, life-threatening illnesses as a result of Covid, Baker says.

“You can get dream vaccines like MMR, which provide lifetime protection against getting or transmitting measles, mumps and rubella,” Baker says. But for diseases like influenza and Covid “it’s a challenge for vaccine designers to make something which creates long-term immunity and prevents you from passing on the virus”. For now, these vaccines are most effective when people receive them regularly.

While booster vaccines are freely available to anyone over age 30 (and to vulnerable groups), low uptake contributes to the virus spreading and people getting seriously sick. Baker would like to see access to booster vaccines extended to everyone over the age of 18, as is the case in Australia. “People in their twenties are teachers, healthcare workers – they’re coming into contact with a lot of potentially infected people,” he says.



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Fashion designer Tom Conway can talk about his neck-breaking accident now In fact, he's thriving.

Good week/bad week: Huge profits for energy gentailers are probably bad, right? It was a good week for the major gentailers, which posted a combined profit of \$1.85 billion. That's good for the New Zealand public, which owns 51% of the four companies, and is bad for the New Zealand public, which makes up 100% of their customers.

Honestly, we'd really rather not get Covid at all – even if the vaccine stops us getting severely sick. Help!

Self-isolate if you test positive for Covid (or any other transmissible respiratory illness). It is one of the best ways to stop the virus spreading. There are standard rapid antigen tests which detect Covid as well as more expensive combined tests which also can detect the flu and RSV. Unfortunately, few people are testing for Covid now, as indicated by the low numbers of self-reported cases. Baker believes that's because the tests are no longer free.

You can also reduce the viruses in the air you're breathing by improving ventilation, Baker says. That means opening a window or door or talking to your employer about air ventilation and using filters or sterilisers.

You can't always control the air around you, like on public transport or planes. In those circumstances, Baker recommends a well-fitted respirator mask, like an N95. They provide a high degree of protection. While mask use was common in 2020 and 2021, New Zealand has reverted to not wearing masks. Baker hopes to see a swing back to mask use and believes if more people don a mask, their use quickly spreads. The more masks we see, the more likely we are to mask up. He suggests when you see a wave starting, get your mask out and wear it if you commute.

He also encourages people to cancel events if they're sick, and says the more people that do this, the more it becomes a social norm. Think about it: who wants to a friend sharing their virus? "You don't want people to just taking some pseudoephedrine, covering their symptoms and soldiering on."

**An earlier version of this story said there were 19 deaths last week, but [Health NZ's tracker](#) has now changed this figure to five. Covid-attributed deaths are not reported in the same week they occur. The story has also been clarified to make the mechanisms of mRNA vaccines clearer.*

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Don't give it if you can't take it. (Image: Sky New Zealand. Additional design: Tina Tiller)

SPORTS Today at 5.15am

Warriors CEO Cameron George might be the coolest boss in rugby league

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With a purple Pals in hand during Friday's 40–6 demolition of the Raiders, Warriors CEO Cameron George delivered some sideline payback – but the moment also captured something fans have long known: he gets the Warriors.

The Canberra Raiders were last in Auckland in May 2025. Playing against the Warriors in round 12 of the NRL season, the eventual minor premiers won a tightly fought contest that went down to the wire. Mount Smart stadium was a sellout that night, and in typical Warriors fan fashion, the Raiders players were copping a bit of shit in an emotional game.

Raiders captain Joseph Tapine made a mocking crying gesture with his hands, appearing to be directed at injured Warriors player Charnze Nicol-Klokstad. Following the final hooter, several of the Raiders players performed sarcastic mana waves to the crowd. The tight contest and mocking gestures solidified a rivalry between the two clubs.

Last Friday, the Raiders were back in town and looking to repeat their triumphs of 2025. Unfortunately for them, they got drubbed, losing the match 40-6. Few pundits had picked such a scoreline. For Warriors fans, it was glorious. For Warriors chief executive Cameron George, it was a chance for sweet revenge.

From the sideline, with a purple Pals in hand, George made the same crying gesture Tapine had last year, followed by a few cheeky mana waves to the Raiders players. He had kept the receipts. Unbeknownst to George, the Sky Sports cameras were capturing the moment, and it soon blew up on social media. Many were quick to praise George, saying it showed he was as passionate as anyone about the club.

Those images painted a picture of the type of chief executive many Warriors fans would not have seen before. They showed George as an everyman, no different from the average punter at the Friday night footy. As well as relatable, it gave George an air of coolness seldom afforded to sports executives.

A fight breaks out between the Warriors and Raiders (Photo by Phil Walter/Getty Images)

George's actions conjured comparisons to Tiago Rech, the famous "lone fan" of a Brazilian football club who became the club's president. Like Rech, George's sideline antics blur the line between administrator and supporter – the executive who still behaves like someone who grew up yelling from the stands. In American sport, the closest parallel might be Mark Cuban – the Dallas Mavericks owner who spent two decades heckling referees courtside like an over-invested season ticket holder.

George has led the Warriors since 2017, steering the club through coaching changes, player departures and the unprecedented Covid-era relocation that forced the team to base itself in Australia for three seasons. Through it all, he has cultivated a reputation as one of the more popular executives in the NRL – part boss, part big brother to the club's players and staff.

Perhaps most impressive though, is the transformation of the club's culture. For much of their history, the Warriors were the NRL's great enigma – capable of brilliance one week and chaos the next. The club feels different now. Since 2018, the Warriors have made three finals appearances, with a string of bad injuries arguably being the only reason they haven't won a maiden title.

Any longtime fan will tell you the entire game day experience has improved drastically in the last 10 years – the entertainment is better, there are more hospitality options, and the atmosphere is always electric. It's a testament to the guidance of George.

In a league full of polished corporate types, George reminds us that sometimes, the people at the top aren't that different to the average fan. He feels like the kind of bloke who'd shout you a beer at the bar, and give you a big hug when the team scores a try.

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While most sports executives watch games from corporate boxes, insulated from the chaos below, George prefers the sideline – a purple Pals in hand and the occasional opportunity to remind the opposition that the Warriors remember everything.

In a world full of stiff suits and ties, that might just make him the coolest boss in rugby league.

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