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UNDERSTANDING THE OMICRON VARIANT

A new variant of coronavirus is prompting renewed concern regarding the pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) named the new variant “Omicron.” Omicron is [labeled](#) a “variant of concern,” the agency’s serious category for tracking. Such a designation is reserved for dangerous variants that may be more transmissible or virulent or could decrease the effectiveness of vaccines or treatments.

This article features [Omicron information](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The Emergence of Omicron

On Nov. 24, 2021, a new coronavirus variant was reported to the WHO. This new variant was first detected in Botswana and South Africa.

On Dec. 1, 2021, the first confirmed U.S. case of Omicron was identified. The CDC continues to collaborate with global public health and industry partners to learn about Omicron and monitor its course. At the time of publication, experts don’t yet know how easily it spreads, the severity of illness it causes, or how well available vaccines and medications work against it.

Despite the increased attention of Omicron, Delta remains the main variant circulating in the United States.

What Is Known About Omicron

The CDC shared the following information about the infection and spread of Omicron.

How easily does Omicron spread?

The Omicron variant likely will spread more easily than the original coronavirus strain, but how easily Omicron spreads compared to Delta remains unknown. The CDC expects that anyone with an Omicron infection can spread the virus to others, even if they are vaccinated or don’t have symptoms.

Will Omicron cause more severe illness?

More data is needed to know if Omicron infections, especially reinfections and breakthrough infections in fully vaccinated people, cause more severe illness or death than infection with other variants.

Will vaccines work against Omicron?

Current vaccines are expected to protect against severe illness, hospitalizations and deaths due to infection with the Omicron variant. However, breakthrough infections in fully vaccinated people are likely to occur. With other variants, like Delta, vaccines have remained effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalizations and death. The recent emergence of Omicron further emphasizes the importance of COVID-19 vaccination and boosters.

Will treatments work against Omicron?

Scientists are working to determine how well existing treatments for COVID-19 work. Based on the changed



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genetic makeup of Omicron, some treatments are likely to remain effective while others may be less effective.

Tools to Fight Omicron

There are several tools available today in the United States to fight the Omicron variant. According to the CDC, the following tools can help reduce the spread of Omicron in our country:

- **Vaccines remain the best public health measure to protect people from COVID-19, slow transmission and reduce the likelihood of new variants emerging.** The CDC recommends everyone 5 years of age and older protect themselves from COVID-19 by getting fully vaccinated.
- **Masks offer protection against all variants of COVID-19.** Regardless of vaccination status, the CDC recommends wearing a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high community transmission.
- **Tests can tell you if you are currently infected with COVID-19.** Visit your [state](#), [tribal](#), local or [territorial](#) health department's website to look for the latest local information on testing.

While we learn more about the risk of Omicron, it's essential to use all tools available to [protect yourself and others](#).

Stay Tuned

CDC experts are working to gather data and virus samples that can be studied to answer important questions about the Omicron variant. Scientific experiments have already started, and the CDC will provide updates as soon as possible.

Source: CDC