

News Brief

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What to Know About Omicron—the New Coronavirus Variant

A new variant of coronavirus initially detected in South Africa is prompting renewed concern regarding the pandemic. On Nov. 26, 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) named the new variant “Omicron.” Omicron was labeled a “variant of concern,” the agency’s most 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.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that Omicron has yet to be detected in the United States. However, Omicron has been detected in numerous countries, including Australia, Belgium, Botswana, Britain, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, South Africa and Switzerland. Several countries, including the United States, have already restricted travel while waiting for health experts to learn more about the potentially dangerous variant.

“This is the most concerning variant we’ve seen since Delta. It’s going to take a really high bar for something to take over for Delta, and we don’t know whether this is going to do it.”

- Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute

Epidemiologists are racing to learn more about Omicron as, at this moment, there is too little research available to draw conclusions or provide recommendations. Omicron’s genetic makeup is unique from other circulating coronavirus variants and carries a large number of mutations. In the meantime, health experts urge Americans to continue to take proper precautions.

In addition to determining the extent of the threat presented by Omicron, several studies are underway to understand how COVID-19 vaccines hold up against the new variant.

What’s Next?

Experts still don’t know a lot about the emerging Omicron variant at this point. Scientists are racing to determine its severity and transmissibility, along with how available COVID-19 vaccines protect against the new variant.

Health experts and the CDC continue to encourage COVID-19 vaccination (including booster shots) to best protect yourself and others from current and emerging variants of the coronavirus. Additionally, masking and social distancing may be used to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

We’ll keep you updated as we learn more.