COVID-19 Omicron (B.1.1.529) Variant Updates

Updated December 21, 2021

Summary

- Omicron cases are rapidly increasing in the United States and around the world. In the United States, the Omicron variant has been detected in most states and territories and the number of specimens positive for the Omicron variant represent over 73% of specimens tested in labs as of 12/21/21.

- Omicron is a new SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19 virus) variant, that has been identified in many countries. The WHO and the U.S. government have designated Omicron as a variant of concern.

- Early reports are that the clinical signs and symptoms of COVID-19 from infection with the Omicron variant are similar to those of other variants and may also be absent (asymptomatic).

- The CDC recommends that we remain vigilant as we learn more about this new variant. We know what it takes to prevent the spread of COVID-19. CDC recommends vaccination, masking, improving ventilation, distancing, handwashing, and testing as strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19.

- CDC and FDA scientists are following the details of this new variant. They are working with other U.S. and global public health and industry partners to learn more about this variant, as they continue to monitor its path.

- Vaccination remains vital to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 vaccines approved or authorized in the United States (Pfizer, Moderna and J & J) are highly effective at preventing severe disease and death from the Delta variant, which is currently the dominant variant circulating in the U.S. CDC recommends that everyone ages 5 and older should be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 as soon as possible. In addition, CDC recommends all persons age 16 years and older receive a booster dose at the recommended interval.
What do we know about the Omicron variant so far?

Transmissibility:
• The Omicron variant likely will spread more easily than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus.
• We are still learning how easily Omicron spreads compared to Delta.
• CDC expects that anyone with Omicron infection can spread the virus to others, even if they are vaccinated or don't have symptoms.

Severity of disease:
• More data are needed to know if Omicron infections, and especially reinfections and breakthrough infections in people who are fully vaccinated, cause more severe illness or death than infection with other variants.
• All variants of COVID-19, including the Delta variant that is dominant worldwide, can cause severe disease or death—in particular for the most vulnerable people—and thus prevention is always key.

Effectiveness of prior SARS-CoV-2 infection:
Preliminary evidence from South Africa suggests there may be an increased risk of reinfection with Omicron (that is, people who have previously had COVID-19 could become reinfected more easily with Omicron), as compared to other variants of concern, but information is limited. More information on this will become available in the coming days and weeks.

Effectiveness of vaccines:
• Current vaccines are expected to protect against severe illness, hospitalizations, and deaths due to infection with the Omicron variant. However, breakthrough infections in people who are fully vaccinated 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 vaccination and boosters.

Effectiveness of current treatments:
Scientists are working to determine how well existing treatments for COVID-19 work. Based on the changed genetic make-up of Omicron, some treatments are likely to remain effective while others may be less effective.

What should healthcare providers do?

Early reports are that the clinical signs and symptoms of COVID-19 from infection with the Omicron variant are similar to those of other variants and may also be absent
(asymptomatic). CDC recommends providers continue to closely follow NIH treatment guidelines for COVID-19.

What does CDC recommend the public do?

- Vaccines remain the best public health tool to protect people against COVID-19, slowing down transmission and reducing the emergence of new variants.
  - CDC recommends that everyone 5 years and older protect themselves from COVID-19 by getting fully vaccinated.
  - CDC encourages a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose for those who are eligible, which is currently everyone 16 years and older in the United States.
  - In most situations, Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are preferred over the Janssen COVID-19 vaccine for primary and booster vaccination.

- Masks offer protection against all variants.
  - CDC continues to recommend wearing a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high community transmission, regardless of vaccination status.
  - CDC recommends that everyone age 2 years or older wear masks in public indoor places in areas of substantial or high transmission. Unvaccinated people should wear masks regardless of community transmission level. Masks are required in indoor areas of public transportation conveyances (e.g., buses, trains, planes, etc.) and U.S. transportation hubs whether you are vaccinated or not.

- CDC recommends people follow prevention strategies including:
  - Masking
  - Washing your hands frequently
  - Covering your coughs and sneezes
  - Cleaning and disinfecting
  - Monitoring your health daily
  - Avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces
  - Staying 6 feet away from others

- Testing is an important tool to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.
  - Tests can help you determine whether or not you are currently infected with COVID-19 disease.
  - Persons who have close contact with someone who has COVID-19 should get tested 5-7 days after exposure (even if they are asymptomatic) and wear a mask indoors in public for 14 days following exposure or until their test result is negative.
  - Persons who develop symptoms of COVID-19 should get tested and stay home until their test result is negative; persons who have a positive test result should isolate at home for 10 days.

- Travelers to the U.S. should continue to follow CDC recommendations for traveling.
How are variants classified by scientists?

- **Variants Being Monitored (VBM)** – Variants Being Monitored include variants which do not pose a significant and imminent risk to public health in the United States. There are several in the United States that continue to be monitored and characterized by federal agencies.

- **Variant of Interest (VOI)** – Variants of interest include variants which show evidence that they may be the cause of an increased proportion of cases or unique outbreak clusters. Currently, there are no SARS-CoV-2 variants that are designated as Variants of Interest in the United States.

- **Variant of Concern (VOC)** – Variants of concern are variants for which there is evidence of the variant being more transmissible, causing more severe disease (e.g., increased hospitalizations or deaths), and variants which may lead to the reduced effectiveness of treatments or vaccines. The Delta Variant and now the Omicron variants are VOC in the United States.

- **Variant of High Consequence (VOHC)** – In addition to the attributes of the variant of concern, variants of high consequence may significantly reduce the effectiveness of vaccines and treatments, lead to more severe clinical disease and increased hospitalizations. Currently there are no SARS-CoV-2 variants that rise to the level of high consequence in the United States.

**When was Omicron discovered? Is it spreading? Has it been identified here in the U.S.?**

A new COVID-19 virus was first detected by scientists in Botswana and South Africa in November 2021. On November 26, 2021, WHO designated the variant B.1.1.529 a variant of concern, named Omicron, on the advice of WHO’s Technical Advisory Group on Virus Evolution (TAG-VE). This decision was based on the evidence presented to the TAG-VE that Omicron has several mutations that may have an impact on how it behaves, for example, on how easily it spreads or the severity of illness it causes. Omicron continues to spread here in the United States and globally. As of December 20, 2021, in the United States, Omicron has been detected in most states and territories and is rapidly increasing the proportion of COVID-19 cases it is causing.

**Social Media Posts**

*Talking points, like those above, are meant for just that — talking. They shouldn’t be used verbatim in print, email or social media.*

*Talking points are most effective when you use your own language to share the basic information found in said content, sharing messages in a style of speech that is both expected and best*
understood by your audiences. For social media, that means keeping it short, conversational and not trying to tackle too much information at once. Stick to the most important details, and don’t try to explain too much in a single post.

You wouldn’t read Shakespeare to a fifth-grade class; instead, you would talk about the general themes of Shakespeare’s stories and avoid the complicated language. We suggest a similar approach to using critical vaccine information on social media. For example:

**Twitter (limited to 280 characters with spaces):**

New variants of the virus are expected to occur. Taking measures to reduce the spread of infection, like getting a #COVID19 vaccine, are the best ways to slow the emergence & spread of new variants.

Symptoms of the #Omicron variant so far are similar to those of other COVID-19 variants.

It appears that the #Omicron variant spreads more easily than the original COVID-19 virus.

CDC expects that anyone with #Omicron infection can spread the virus to others, even if they are vaccinated or don’t have symptoms.

CDC recommends #vaccination, masking, improving ventilation, distancing, handwashing, and testing to slow the spread of #COVID19.

#Vaccines can reduce your risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and death from #COVID19.

CDC recommends that everyone ages 5 and older should be fully #vaccinated against COVID-19 as soon as possible.

CDC also recommends that all persons age 16 years and older receive a #boosterdose at the recommended interval.

#COVID19boosterdoses are recommended for everyone 16 years or older.

In most situations, Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are preferred over the J&J COVID-19 vaccine for primary and booster vaccination.

**Facebook:**

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Resources

2. CDC: HAN: New Omicron Variant: 12/1/2021
6. Frequently asked questions for the B.1.1.529 mutated SARS-CoV-2 lineage in South Africa - NICD