UK variant discovered at University of Pittsburgh and Penn State campuses

Alex Findijs
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The University of Pittsburgh ordered students to shelter in place after a large outbreak of COVID-19 cases last week. The number of active infections rose to 76 among staff and students, with 72 infections recorded in the last week alone. The total number of infections at the university now stands at over 1,060 for students and 207 for faculty and staff.

In a statement last week by the COVID-19 Medical Response Office (CMRO), the university noted that the rise in cases is likely tied to the rise in the surrounding community. The five-day moving average rose to 8.6 per day last week, mirroring the broader community trends in Allegheny County. Both the county and the university are reporting an average of 30 cases per 100,000 each day, one of the highest rates of infection in Pennsylvania.

Concern over the sudden rise in cases was heightened over the detection of the B.1.1.7 variant of the virus, more commonly referred to as the UK variant.

"With the U.K. variant, B.1.1.7, present on the Pittsburgh campus, we are highly concerned about increased transmission rates and a surge in cases. Forty-two new students testing positive for COVID-19 in three days is worrisome," said the statement.

The UK variant is up to 50 percent more transmissible and has been linked to higher death rates in the United Kingdom.

In response, the university issued a shelter-in-place order and moved into "Elevated Risk Posture," which will enforce additional restrictions on campus activities in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. The shelter in place had originally been planned for April 16 as a precaution ahead of graduation and will remain in effect until further notice. A tweet by the university informed students that they should "only go out for classes, work if needed, safe exercise, takeout food and essentials."

In a statement on Wednesday, the CMRO said: "This action is being taken to respond to a consistent increase in positive cases among students. With the presence of the U.K. variant, B 1.1.7., on campus and in Allegheny County, the COVID-19 Medical Response Office (CMRO) is concerned that this trend will continue."

Additionally, the statement noted: "Of significant concern is that the increase in positive cases since the end of last week is now among our resident hall students."

The spread of COVID-19 through residence halls is particularly disturbing considering the presence of the UK variant on campus. Given the higher transmissibility of this variant, it is possible that large numbers of students have already been infected and may test positive in the coming days.

The university's reckless insistence on retaining in-person instruction will no doubt continue to exacerbate the problem. With students still moving and gathering around campus under the new guidelines, the virus will still be able to spread between students and staff, and it has the potential to spread to new residence halls.

The experience of nearby Binghamton University offers a sharp warning. After a spike in cases, the university committed to only partial restrictions and insisted on keeping in-person classes in session. The result has been nearly 1,000 cases this semester. Binghamton University has also reported that they ran out of isolation housing for infected students. In the end, students were told to return to their dorm rooms to wait for an isolation room to be prepared, creating conditions for further spread in the dorms.

Another warning of what Pittsburgh may experience in the coming weeks is Pennsylvania State University. Penn State has also detected the UK variant among

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students and recorded 264 cases last week with a positivity rate of four percent. Cases have been steadily climbing for the past two weeks, and 223 students are currently in quarantine and isolation.

Centre County, Pennsylvania, where Penn State is located, has also seen a considerable rise in case numbers. The daily infections per 100,000 people more than doubled from 18 in the second week of March to over 44 today. Hospitalizations have also doubled from 11 on March 10 to 22 on March 26, highlighting that the rise in cases is not just affecting students.

The variant was detected through testing of wastewater samples, a common practice at universities used to test large groups of students using fewer resources. The sample in which the variant was detected was collected on March 7, a week before student cases doubled. Under these conditions it is likely that the virus may spread to a significant portion of the campus population if left unchecked.

Remarkably, unlike the University of Pittsbugh, Penn State has not responded with any additional restrictions. Instead, university administrators and health officials called on students to continue to social distance and wear masks. Despite issuing 381 sanctions on students for not wearing masks in public or violating restrictions on gatherings, there are no reported enforcement mechanisms for students to get tested.

Penn State's surveillance testing systems is also notably weak. Only one to two percent of the campus population is selected for surveillance testing each day, in contrast to other schools of similar size and stature, like the University of Illinois or Syracuse University, which have weekly testing regimes for each student.

Matt DiSanto, editor of *Onward State*, an unofficial student newspaper and blog, wrote: "As Penn State introduces more and more in-person events and experiences, the harder it'll get to use an 'off-ramp' to deescalate student life. … We've survived nearly eight months without the college experience of years past already, and I'd happily continue if it meant fewer students unnecessarily contract COVID-19."

He continued: "If Penn State can't handle its COVID-19 outbreak, surrounding communities will hurt, too."

These outbreaks at two of Pennsylvania's largest universities with the presence of a more contagious variant is an alarming development in the fight against the pandemic. Even with the rate of vaccinations rising each day, it is quite possible that the new variants will cause a fourth spike in cases and deaths before the population can be fully vaccinated. If nothing is done to stop the spread of the virus, universities will once again act as vectors for their transmission to the wider community and accelerate the spread of the variant.

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