

Omicron variant threatens to unleash new global surge of COVID-19 pandemic

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Scientists have detected a new variant of COVID-19, the Omicron (B.1.1.529) variant, which the World Health Organization (WHO) stated on Friday was officially recognized as “variant of concern” (VOC). The variant appears to have originated in southern Africa but has already been detected in several other countries. Initial indications are that an unusual constellation of mutations make the variant far more infectious than the Delta variant and potentially vaccine-resistant.

In its statement Friday, the WHO said that “preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection with this variant, as compared to other VOCs,” including the Delta variant. “The number of cases of this variant appears to be increasing in almost all provinces in South Africa.”

The WHO said that the first known confirmed case of infection from the Omicron variant came from a specimen collected on November 9. In just over two weeks, however, it has quickly become the dominant strain in South Africa.

The seven-day moving average of new cases in South Africa has risen fourfold from 265 to over 1,043 new COVID-19 cases per day in two weeks. Yesterday, the country reported 2,465 new infections. Seventy-five percent of all currently sequenced coronavirus cases are attributed to the latest variant, soon expected to reach 100 percent. New infections are exploding in highly urbanized Gauteng, a small northeastern province in South Africa, accounting for less than 2 percent of the country’s land area but home to a quarter of its population.

Dr. Tulio de Oliveira, a bioinformatician at the Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine and director of the Centre for Epidemic Response & Innovation, explained that the variant is “really worrisome at the

mutational level.” The new variant possesses over 50 mutations, with 32 on the virus’ spike protein, which it uses to bind to human respiratory cells.

Dr. de Oliveira explained that many of these mutations are linked to increasing antibody resistance, which raises concerns that vaccines and therapeutics will be less effective in combating the new variant.

Expressing the gravity of the threat to the entire world population, the European Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a statement, warning, “given its immune escape potential and potentially increased transmissibility advantage compared to Delta, we assess the probability of further introduction and community spread in [Europe] as HIGH.” It added, “In a situation where the Delta variant is resurgent in [Europe], the impact of the introduction and possible further spread of Omicron could be VERY HIGH.”

According to Dr. Yaneer Bar-Yam, a complex system physicist who has been studying pandemics for nearly two decades, current rough estimates indicate that the Omicron variant is six times more transmissible than the original variant and twice as transmissible as the Delta variant. Bar-Yam also estimates that the mortality rate for Omicron is eight times higher than the original variant.

Dr. Anthony Leonardi, a T-cell immunologist, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The [Omicron variant] is probably everywhere, and it now has a huge capability to mutate. As it outpaces Delta, it’s going to create even more infections. It will therefore evolve even faster than Delta.”

Hong Kong, Israel, and Belgium have already identified infected patients with the new variant, which means that the current iteration of the virus has spread globally. In Israel, one of the infected individuals, who had returned from Malawi, was previously fully

vaccinated and had received their booster shot two months ago. Two others are also in quarantine, awaiting further testing.

The young unvaccinated woman identified in Belgium was traveling to Egypt via Turkey and had no links to South Africa.

European governments and the US scrambled to announce travel restrictions from countries in southern Africa. Early on Friday, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tweeted, “The EU commission will propose, in close coordination with member states, to activate the emergency brake to stop air travel from the Southern African region due to the variant of concern, B.1.1529.”

Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden’s chief pandemic adviser, attempted to assure the US public that there was “no indication” the Omicron variant had reached the US. This is an attempt to deflect public alarm and anger while the Biden administration works out its response.

In line with the EU, the Biden administration imposed air travel restrictions from southern African countries Friday afternoon. “As a precautionary measure, until we have more information,” Biden said in a statement, “I’m ordering additional air travel restrictions from South Africa and seven other countries. These new restrictions will take effect on Monday.”

The travel restrictions have the character of stop-gap measures, which will come too late to stop the spread of the variant globally. The removal of all restrictions on the virus in the US and the major European countries (including the reopening of schools and workplaces) guarantees that if the variant has been introduced, it is already rapidly spreading.

Even prior to the announcement of the discovery of the new strain, COVID-19 cases have surged globally, particularly in Europe and the United States, which are entering the winter months when infection rates usually spike.

Biden encouraged Americans to get vaccinated or to get their booster shot. “If you have not gotten vaccinated, or have not taken your children to get vaccinated,” Biden said, “now is the time.”

While vaccines are a critical tool in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists warned that vaccination is not a “magic bullet” that will end the

pandemic. Lockdowns, in coordination with a robust testing, contact tracing and quarantine program, are essential to controlling the spread of the disease. Allowing the virus to continue to propagate internationally, scientists have repeatedly warned, will lead to new and more infectious variants, such as Omicron, that could evade the immunity that the vaccines provide.

Biden has made the full reopening of schools and businesses—before the virus has been brought under control and while millions of children remain unvaccinated—a pillar of his administration. Under Biden’s watch, state governors have abandoned almost all mitigation measures, such as state-wide mask mandates, even as close to 100,000 people fall ill and more than 1,000 die every day from COVID-19 in the United States.



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