

World Health Organization warns of Omicron “tsunami”

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As cases of the dangerous new Omicron variant of COVID-19 surge around the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned Tuesday of a “tsunami” of COVID-19 cases.

“Seventy-seven countries have now reported cases of Omicron, and the reality is that Omicron is probably in most countries even if it hasn’t been detected yet,” said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. “Omicron is spreading at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant.”

He added, “We are concerned that people are dismissing Omicron as mild. Surely, we have learned by now that we underestimate this virus at our peril. Even if Omicron does cause less severe disease, the sheer number of cases could once again overwhelm unprepared health systems. I need to be very clear. *Vaccines alone will not get any country out of this crisis.* Countries can and must prevent the spread of Omicron with measures that work today.” [Emphasis added]

Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, technical lead on COVID-19 at the WHO, echoing the Director-General’s comments, also warned, “I think we are facing a tsunami of infections in the world, both Delta and Omicron...Vaccination alone is not enough. Vaccination prevents serious illness and death but does not completely prevent infection.”

These assessments are based on Omicron’s ability to escape, to some extent, from the immune response established by the current COVID-19 vaccines. Recent data out of South Africa suggests fully vaccinated individuals with two doses will have a 33 percent protection against symptomatic infection and a 70 percent protection from admission for severe disease. However, the exponential surge of cases will overcome these statistical margins and inundate health systems.

The previous week, December 8, 2021, in an interview published in *New Scientist*, Dr. Van Kerkhove said, “We have seen the full spectrum of severity with the variant, and people will die from it. Saying ‘it’s only mild’ is very dangerous. If it is more transmissible than Delta [which has been determined to be the case], there will be more cases, more hospitalization, and more deaths.”

Yesterday, South Africa reported nearly 24,000 cases with a positivity rate of 35 percent. Admissions jumped by 697 in 24 hours, bringing the total to close to 6,900. Forty-nine more people were added to the ICUs and 24 more died. Yet, when daily excess deaths are analyzed, these statistics have jumped more than six-fold since the second half of November. Having reached 520 on December 13, 2021 from a low of 85 on November 22, 2021, this suggests a far more dire situation than is being admitted in the US media. The rise in excess deaths is the most accurate predictor of the state of affairs.

Outside of South Africa, Denmark and the UK face a rapid surge of infections with Omicron. On Monday, Sajid Javid, the Secretary for Health and Social Care of the United Kingdom, estimated that approximately 200,000 people per day were becoming infected with Omicron. These estimates were based on projections by the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) that on December 7, 2021, there were around 78,000 Delta infections.

On that day, approximately 20 percent of all sequenced infections were Omicron, implying an additional 23,000 daily Omicron infections. And under their assumption that Omicron is doubling every two days, the UK Health Security Agency placed the estimate of Omicron infections on December 13, 2021, at 207,000. Furthermore, they warned that if Omicron

remains on its present trajectory, the UK could expect to see more than one million daily Omicron infections.

Even Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has derided any serious measure that deals with the pandemic, has had to acknowledge his concerns over the spread of Omicron and told the BBC that these infections were leading to a rise in hospital admissions. “Sadly, yes, Omicron is producing hospitalizations, and sadly at least one patient has been confirmed to have died with Omicron,” he said on Monday at the Stowe Health Vaccination Centre. Yesterday, 65 children were hospitalized in England over 24 hours, the worst figure during the pandemic.

In a televised announcement to the nation on Monday evening, Johnson said, “I need to speak to you this evening because I’m afraid we’re now facing an emergency in our battle with the new variant, Omicron ... We know from bitter experience how these exponential curves develop. No one should be in any doubt there is a tidal wave of Omicron coming.” He even said, “Do not make the mistake of thinking Omicron can’t hurt you, can’t make you and your loved ones seriously ill.”

Johnson, however, refused to close schools or non-essential businesses, instead doubling down on the “vaccine-only” approach condemned as inadequate by the WHO.

Javid warned, “The lag between infections and hospitalizations is around two weeks. With infections rising so quickly, we’re likely to see a substantial rise in hospitalizations before any measures start to have an impact. So, there really is no time to lose.”

Denmark and Norway have acknowledged they expect daily infections to surpass all previous records as Omicron will combine with Delta to fuel the ongoing surge. In response to the threat posed by the new variant, Denmark has at least called for early school closures but has done little else than limit hours for nightlife and promote remote work, which will do little to stem the tide of infections.

Norwegian health officials warned Omicron could infect between 90,000 to 300,000 people each day by the beginning of the New Year if measures proved ineffective. The number of infections is already three times higher than at any time in the pandemic. As hospital admissions climb, Jonas Gahr, Norway’s Prime Minister, warned the situation quickly grows

serious.

In the United States, which has officially recognized more than 50 million reported infections and 800,000 deaths and where Delta continues to pummel the Northeast and upper Midwest, 35 states have reported Omicron infections in the three weeks since WHO declared it a variant of concern. The highest reported number of such cases have been sequenced in Texas and New York, each with 38 confirmations. And in each state, infections are climbing.

New York, in particular, is facing a catastrophe. The state has seen a massive surge in cases, with the seven-day average of new infections now exceeding 10,000 per day. According to *CNN*, at Cornell University, there have been 903 cases of COVID-19 reported among students between December 6 and 13. Joel Malina, Vice President for University Relations, noted in his statement that a “very high percentage” of these were due to the Omicron variant. “Virtually every case of the Omicron variant to date has been found in fully vaccinated students, a portion of whom had also received a booster shot.”

Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, who had predicted Delta’s dominance as early as April 2021, told *Intelligencer* last week, “I think Omicron is going to be remarkable in how fast it takes. If you look at what it took for Alpha and Delta to prevail, it took really two months before they became the dominant variants around the world, some countries sooner than others. I think we are going to see this one become dominant variant in just a matter of weeks.”



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