

Omicron Variant: What We Know

On November 26, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified a new COVID-19 variant called omicron as a variant of concern. On December 1, 2021, the first case of the new variant in the United States was detected in California. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) a variant of concern is a variant that has potential for higher disease transmission and more severe disease.

So what do we know about this new variant?

“We know that it has some origins in South Africa. We know that it is genetically different and that it is what they call a variant of concern. But we don’t know a whole lot else. We don’t know how virulent it is, which means how severe the infection is. We don’t know how transmissible it is, which is how likely it is to spread,” says Dr. Bill Walsh, chief medical officer for OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois.

According to the WHO, the omicron variant has a large number of mutations, some of which are concerning. One concern in particular based on preliminary studies is an increased risk of reinfection. This means people who have previously had COVID-19 could become re-infected more easily with omicron as compared to other variants of concern, but information is limited.

While we continue to learn more, health experts advise people to remain vigilant and continue practicing COVID-19 safety measures we have grown accustomed to over the last two years.

“The precautions we are currently taking such as wearing a mask, washing your hands frequently, watching your distance, and getting vaccinated will be the same precautions for the omicron variant as they are for the delta variant and as they were for the original SARS-CoV-2,” Dr. Walsh advises.

With the discovery of another new variant, the COVID-19 booster shot has come into question for some, particularly whether or not people should get a COVID-19 booster now or hold off to see if a new vaccine is developed next year. However, and in large part due to the omicron variant, health experts strongly recommend getting your COVID-19 booster shot as soon as you are eligible.

Recently, the CDC updated its guidelines to advise everyone ages 18 and older to get a booster shot either six months after their second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines or two months after their initial Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The emergence of the omicron variant only further emphasizes the importance of vaccination, boosters, and preventative efforts needed to protect against COVID-19 – even with the mutations that are occurring.

“We expected COVID to mutate. We have seen a few major mutations – most notably, recently the delta variant. It’s quite clear that the vaccines we have in this country work well on even the delta variant. It may not prevent spread, but it helps prevent severe disease and hospitalization. About 90% or more of the hospitalized patients with COVID are unvaccinated. So it stands to reason that the best protection you can do against the omicron variant would be to get yourself vaccinated,” explains Dr. Walsh.

While breakthrough cases are still expected, the COVID-19 vaccines currently available remain the most safe and effective way to prevent serious illness or death, and to help reduce the spread of the virus.

“The COVID vaccine is like a seatbelt. If you have it, it protects you when you need it. You don’t drive your car without a seatbelt, so why live your life without a COVID vaccination?” Dr. Walsh adds.

Talk to your primary care provider if you are interested in learning more about COVID-19 booster shots. If you have not yet received your COVID-19 vaccine, [sign up today](#).