



Public Health Brief

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The New COVID-19 Variant of Concern: Omicron

WHAT WE KNOW

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Four days ago, South Africa announced the detection of a new variant of COVID-19 infection. Since then, over 115 cases have been identified, located in other African nations, Hong Kong, Europe, and now tonight in Canada. I expect we will see an announcement within days if not hours of discovery of cases in the USA. The biggest concern – there are lots of mutations in this variant, about 50-60, vastly different than anything seen before. The rate of spread has drastically outpaced that of the very contagious delta variant. South Africa now reports a 10 times increase in cases, in virtually all provinces.

The appearance of a new variant should not come as a surprise. New variants are inevitable, as the virus is still evolving and will continue to do so. We have stated that this was going to happen as long as large segments of the population remain unvaccinated, providing fertile ground for the virus to continue its relentless and imperfect multiplication. The vaccination rate in South Africa is in the range of 40% (which is high for the African continent), and young adults have a vaccination rate of 25%. It is reported that approx. 85% of cases are occurring among those unvaccinated.

There are many unknowns where answers may take weeks. Does it cause more serious infections and deaths? What age groups are most affected? Are the symptoms any different than we have seen so far with COVID-19? Will current lab tests work? Will current treatments be effective? Will current vaccines be less protective? An incredible worldwide effort is underway to obtain answers as quickly as possible.

New variants are a reminder that the pandemic is far from over. Inequity in testing, treatment, availability and use of masks, and vaccine distribution (and unwillingness to accept it!) will extend the



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pandemic. Until we reduce the spread of new infections, we will see serious effects on education, economies, and tremendous loss of life. And until we all participate and do this, we are all at grave risk of a more protracted pandemic.

New variants are not a reason to stop doing what we know works to prevent illness, stop the spread, and limit hospitalizations and deaths. Expect new orders and travel restrictions in the days to come. In Alpine County, we are monitoring the situation closely, and will keep you informed as there are new developments and answers to these and other questions. We will respond to new data with information in order to protect all of us as a community. In the meantime, what should you be doing?

Continue the classic current tried-and-true public health recommendations:

- vaccination (including boosters) – THERE IS NO BETTER TIME!
- testing
- masking in public indoor places
- handwashing and use of hand sanitizer
- social distancing
- good ventilation
- avoiding crowded spaces, and masking when unavoidable
- Stay home from work or school if you are sick and call us or your healthcare provider

COVID-19 Testing and Vaccinations available in Alpine County

Call 530-694-2146, Option 1

Leave a message and a staff person will get back to you

- [November 26 media statement from CDC](#)
- [WHO: Classification of Omicron \(B.1.1.529\): SARS-CoV-2 Variant of Concern](#)
- [South African doctor who raised alarm about omicron variant says symptoms are 'unusual but mild', *The Telegraph*, 27Nov21](#)
- Department of State Level 4 Do Not Travel [Advisory](#), 27Nov21
- CDC Level 4 COVID-Very High/Avoid Travel [Notice](#), 26Nov21
- [Fact Sheet: Omicron Variant \(ca.gov\)](#)



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