COVID-19 FACT SHEET
Omicron Variant

November 28, 2021

What do we know about the Omicron variant?

We are still learning about the new variant, including how it spreads and infects individuals as well as how it responds to vaccines. Here is what we know:

- There are currently no cases in the United States; however, based on other variants, it is only a matter of time before Omicron is detected in the United States. New variants will continue to evolve as long as there are large proportions of unvaccinated people.

- This new variant has many mutations in important areas of the virus that impact infectiousness and the ability for immune systems to protect from infection. Some of the mutations are concerning to scientists because they are very different from other variants previously detected, and some are similar.

- We do not know at this time if this new variant causes more severe COVID-19 illness than other variants or how it might impact response to treatment.

What is California doing in response to the new Omicron variant?

To prepare for this variant's arrival to the United States and California, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) is doing the following:

- Monitoring for the presence of the variant in California through the California SARS-CoV-2 Whole Genome Sequencing Initiative, known as COVIDNet. This is a public-private partnership that provides California with genomic sequencing to help understand and control the spread of COVID-19. COVIDNet gives us the ability to detect variants early.

- Partnering with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to gather information and expertise to help the public, local public health departments and health care providers.

- Preparing to increase COVID-19 testing at airports across California for U.S. citizens and legal residents returning from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi.

- Focusing on COVID-19 vaccination and booster efforts to ensure that all Californians have access to safe, effective, and free vaccines that can prevent serious illness and

death from COVID-19. It's not too late for anyone eligible to get vaccinated or boosted to protect themselves and others against COVID-19.

What can Californians do to protect themselves from COVID-19 and the Omicron variant?

There are four specific actions that can be taken by all Californians today to help slow the spread of COVID-19, including the Omicron variant.

- **Get Vaccinated:** All COVID-19 vaccines currently available in California are safe and effective at preventing serious illness from COVID-19. Vaccination will protect you and those you love. Californians ages 5 and older are now eligible for vaccination. Additionally, those over the age of 18 who are at least six months since last does of Pfizer or Moderna, or at least two months since J&J, are eligible for a booster. To get vaccinated or get a booster call (833) 422-4255 or visit myturn.ca.gov.

- **Wear Masks:** CDPH recommends everyone wear masks in indoor public places (such as grocery stores and movie theaters) regardless of vaccination status. Masks are required in indoor public places for everyone who is not fully vaccinated. More restrictive local and workplace rules may apply. Everyone must wear a mask on public transit (airports, planes, trains, buses, stations) and in healthcare settings, K-12 schools, childcare settings, correctional facilities, cooling centers, and shelters. Learn more about our masking recommendations.

- **Get Tested:** You should immediately get tested for COVID-19 if you are feeling any symptoms – regardless of your vaccination status. COVID-19 symptoms can feel like a common cold (including just "the sniffles"), seasonal allergies, or flu. COVID-19 testing in California is free to anyone who needs it. You can book a free test appointment, find a walk-in test clinic, or buy a self-test kit from your local drugstore. Find a testing site online or call (833) 422-4255 or 211. Learn more about COVID-19 tests.

- **Stay Home if Sick:** Stay home if you are feeling sick.

What is a Variant of Concern?

The WHO determines which variants are of concern based on having one or more of the following changes that could impact global public health.

- Increase in transmissibility or detrimental change in COVID-19 epidemiology; OR

- Increase in virulence or change in clinical disease presentation; OR

- Decrease in effectiveness of public health and social measures or available diagnostics, vaccines, or therapeutics.

More information: Tracking SARS-CoV-2 variants (who.int)

Can current COVID-19 tests detect the Omicron variant?

Yes, current understanding is that available PCR and antigen tests should detect this variant. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is currently confirming this information.

What should someone who is returning from a country of concern do?

The CDC recommends that travelers from Southern Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi to test within 3-5 days after arrival, quarantine for 7 days, and isolate and test if COVID-19 symptoms develop.

Timeline of events related to the Omicron variant

November 9: First known confirmed B.1.1.529 infection from a specimen collected in South Africa.

November 24: South Africa announced the detection of a new variant, B.1.1.529 following genomic sequencing.

November 26: World Health Organization designated B.1.1.529 a variant of concern and named it Omicron. The U.S. government placed a travel ban for non-U.S. citizen travelers from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi.

November 27: At least 115 recorded cases identified, with most from Botswana and South Africa, and others from Hong Kong, Belgium, Israel, Germany, Netherlands and the United Kingdom.