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Countries Across Europe Ban Travel From U.K. as New Covid-19 Strain Emerges; In U.S., Leaders Call for Calm and Allow Travel to Continue

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A [new strain](#) of Covid-19 believed to be 70 percent more contagious than the current variant is wreaking havoc in the United Kingdom, and has caused countries across Europe — Germany, France, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands — to ban travel from England. Canada and Israel have also moved to ban travel from the U.K. in light of the new strain.

U.K. scientists say the mutation changes the spike protein found on the surface of the virus by increasing its ability to latch onto human cells — allowing the virus to spread 70 percent faster than the dominant strain.

The new Covid-19 variant has at least 23 new genetic changes, which is an unusually high number, according to the scientists (via [the Wall Street Journal](#)). The spike protein contains amino acids that use furin, a body enzyme that breaks down cell coatings and allows Covid-19 to penetrate.

British Government Chief Scientist Adviser Patrick Vallance, said Saturday that studies show the latest variant of the virus spreads significantly faster than earlier strains. The U.K. government said cases rose 51 percent last week compared to the week prior, forcing Prime Minister Boris Johnson to implement fresh lockdowns on regions affected by the surge, while shutting down nonessential businesses. Previously, the U.K. government planned a five-day relaxation on Covid-19 rules that would have allowed three families to mingle during the Christmas holidays.

Meanwhile in the U.S., officials were urging calm on Sunday in light of the new strain, saying there was no evidence that it had arrived in the U.S., and that while it was still an unknown as to whether the vaccines recently approved were ineffective against the variant, officials were confident that the vaccines would successfully combat the latest strain.

As of Monday, the U.S. had not banned travel from the U.K., though the CDC is advising against travel to the European country.

The decision to keep travel active between the two countries has enlisted the ire of some U.S. officials. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, for example, lashed out at the federal government for what he said was the government's slow response. "Other people are banning people coming in from the U.K.; we have six flights a day coming in from the U.K. and we are doing absolutely nothing," Mr. Cuomo said during a call with reporters on Sunday. "Today, that variant is getting on a plane and landing at JFK. How many times in life do you have to make the same mistake?"

President-elect Joe Biden's aides said Sunday his team would be updated on the new variant this week, though Mr. Biden's choice for public health adviser and his choice for surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, said precautions already in place needed to be utilized. The variant "does not change what we do in terms of precautions," he said.

According to Mr. Vallance, the U.K. government's chief scientist adviser, any conclusions that the new strain may be less dangerous were preliminary. There were also theoretical reasons why the new strain may alter immune response, although he said there was no evidence to backup such assumptions.

"The working assumption is that the vaccine response should be adequate for this virus, but we need to keep vigilant about this," he said, via WSJ.

According to Neville Sanjana of the New York Genome Center, there is no evidence to suggest the new strain has arrived to the U.S.