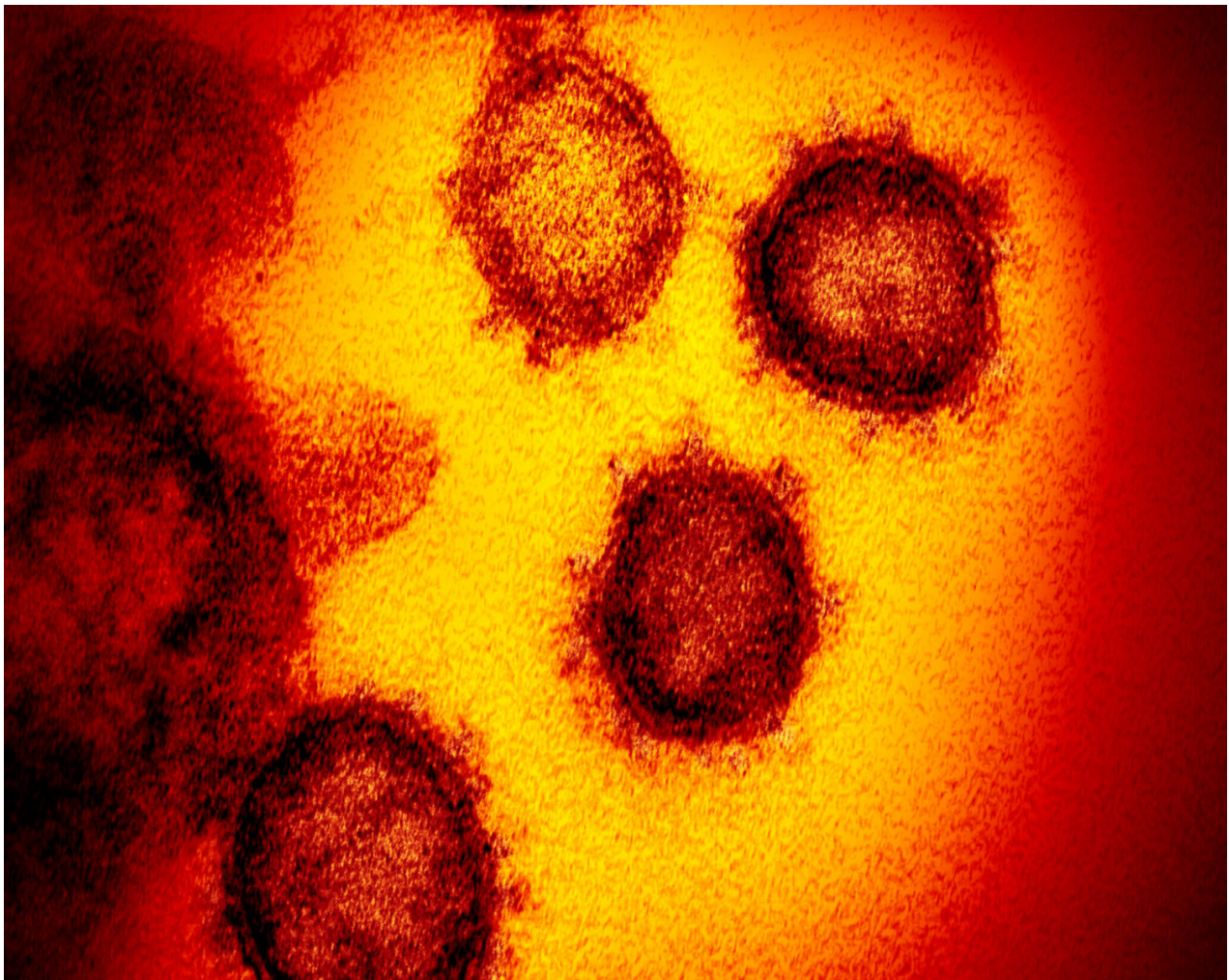


The Virgin Islands Consortium

New Covid-19 Strain Emerging From South Africa Has 'E484K' Mutation That Weakens Vaccines; Strain is Also Extremely Contagious

Coronavirus / **Published On January 07, 2021 07:11 AM /**

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As the pandemic rages on, new Covid-19 variants are emerging, with the latest strain, first reported in South Africa, being potentially more harmful than the variant that was [first reported in the United Kingdom](#) in December.

The new Covid-19 variant emerging from South Africa, named B.1.351, contains traits similar the strain first reported in the U.K., known as N501 — making the South African variant as viral as its British predecessor. But the South African strain contains another mutation, named E484K, that isn't present in the U.K. variant.

According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), researchers believe that the E484K mutation has changed the shape of Covid-19's spike protein, which the virus uses to attach to and infect human cells. The E484K mutation, researchers believe, makes it harder for some antibodies to neutralize the virus. If the research holds, there could be consequences on how the new strain affects people who were previously infected by the virus and have built immune responses, or those who have taken the Covid-19 vaccines currently available.

Researchers studying the latest strain say E484K's unusually large number of mutations, especially in the spike protein, make the vaccines less effective against the strain, though the vaccines are not expected to be totally worthless. A vaccine that is weaker against the new variant means more vaccine recipients are likely to be infected with the virus a second time, in some cases mildly. And it also means more people will need to be vaccinated to help develop herd immunity and end the pandemic altogether.

The U.K. variant has since spread to many countries, including U.S. states Colorado, California, Florida and New York. Likewise, the South African strain has been reported in Japan, Finland, South Korea, Switzerland, the U.K. and Australia.

The South African variant was first reported amidst a wave of new infections and rising Covid-19 related deaths in the country. But the new strain isn't receiving all the blame for the latest deaths and surge in cases on the continent; thousands of South Africans have been crowding beaches, restaurants and bars, inevitably leading to more infections.

To that end, the government has mandated masks, banned social gatherings and has prohibited the sale of alcohol. Popular beaches and parks have also been closed.

No Cases Reported in U.S. as Yet

As of Thursday there were no cases of the South African strain reported in the United States, however that may be because enough positive test samples have not been sequenced. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, [told News Week](#), "I would be surprised if it were not already in the United States, but you never know until you find it, and then prove it's here. But thus far, we have not detected the South African strain."