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Highly Contagious Covid-19 Variant First Detected in UK to Become Dominant Strain in U.S. By March, CDC Warns

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A highly contagious strain of Covid-19 first reported in the United Kingdom has been spreading rapidly in the United States and will become the dominant strain in the country by March if efforts are not taken immediately to contain its spread, said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in a report Friday.

The CDC said measures such as mask wearing and social distancing need to be increased to help contain the spread, or the new strain will overwhelm already burdened hospitals with ill patients, increasing the risk of more fatalities.

“We expect these numbers to rise in the coming weeks,” said Jay Butler, the CDC’s deputy director for infectious diseases, (via the [Wall Street Journal](#)).

Federal health officials said the U.K. variant, called B.1.1.7, had infected at least 76 people in 12 states as of Jan. 13 and would most likely exacerbate the pandemic in the U.S. “If you’re not wearing a mask or if you’re getting sort of lax about it because you’re getting tired of wearing the mask, I really encourage you to wear the mask,” Dr. Butler said. He said while the latest development in the pandemic does not mean businesses should shut down, “it does mean that we have to take steps to be able to protect ourselves and limit our contacts with others.”

USVI health officials said they were monitoring the U.K. variant. “The U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health is sending samples to the CDC for sequencing to determine if and when the variant is detected here as well,” said Dr. Esther Ellis, D.O.H.’s territorial epidemiologist, during the Bryan administration’s Covid-19 press briefing Thursday. “These recent events are alarming and could have real impacts in the Virgin Islands, in which we have seen [cases increasing significantly](#).”

The new variant is believed to be 50 percent more contagious than the current strain, but health officials say the current strategy of wearing masks and social distancing works against it. 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 50 percent faster than the dominant strain.

The U.K. variant has at least 23 new genetic changes, which is an unusually high number, according to scientists. The spike protein contains amino acids that use furin, a body enzyme that breaks down cell coatings and allows Covid-19 to penetrate.

Pfizer said the vaccines protect against the U.K. variant, however, to beat the virulent disease, 80 percent of the U.S. population would need to be vaccinated, CDC scientists say — 10 percent higher than some federal officials had anticipated.

According to Johns Hopkins University, the U.S. recorded more than 3,700 fatalities on Thursday, and to date, the country has had more than 390,000 fatalities linked to the pathogen.

CDC officials said 11.1 million Americans had received doses of either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine as of Thursday, with more than 1.1 million of the total being second doses.

Meanwhile, a new variant has emerged from South Africa, named B.1.351, containing traits similar to the strain first reported in the U.K., but with another mutation named E484K that isn’t present in the U.K. variant.

According to [WSJ](#), 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, researches 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.

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