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UK Variant of Covid-19 Could be Up to 40 Percent More Deadly Than Previous Strains

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The United Kingdom variant of Covid-19, already believed to be up to 70 percent more contagious than the strain currently dominant in the U.S. and around the world, could be up to 40 percent more deadly, according to preliminary conclusions from four separate studies. The variant, already the dominant strain in the U.K., [is expected to become the commanding strain](#) in the U.S. by March if efforts are not taken to mitigate spread, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The preliminary results from the four separate studies were released Friday via Britain's top scientific adviser, who said the variant could be 30 percent to 40 percent more lethal.

“We have been informed today that, in addition to spreading more quickly, it also now appears that there is some evidence that the new variant—the variant that was first identified in London and the southeast—may be associated with a higher degree of mortality,” U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Friday (via Wall Street Journal).

This latest development comes as the U.S. and other countries struggle with vaccination rollout, and as other mutations of the virus are popping up, with at least two strains — the [South African](#) and recently a Brazilian strain — showing significant resistance against the vaccines.

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 a recent Bryan administration Covid-19 press briefing. "These recent events are alarming and could have real impacts in the Virgin Islands, in which we have seen [cases increasing significantly](#)."

Even so, scientists advising the British government say the study results were still tentative, and that other factors could contribute to the country's higher Covid-19-related mortality rate. In fact, the U.K. government's chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, warned that research results about the death rates associated with the variant were still highly uncertain.

According to the research paper, the studies depended on a narrow subset of cases. The study measured only about 8 percent of all deaths that took place during the period under examination. Additionally, many of the individuals currently hospitalized are patients with the new variant, and therefore a true rate of survival has yet to be accurately measured.

The four studies were performed by researchers from Imperial College London, Public Health England, Exeter University, and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Mr. Vallance said there appeared to be no change in increased mortality once people were hospitalized. However, when measuring the entire population, deaths were higher among people with the new variant. He said out of 1,000 60 year olds with the new variant, 13 to 14 would be expected to die, while the same number of individuals in the same age range would see only 10 deaths through previous variants.

The good news is research shows the vaccines defeating the U.K. variant. The United Kingdom as of Friday had vaccinated 5.4 million of its population, the most advanced vaccine rollout in Europe.

The CDC said it had reached out to health agencies in the U.K. to learn more about the risk of the new variant, though as of Friday it had not yet examine the latest data. “CDC has not yet seen the data nor had an opportunity to speak with colleagues in the United Kingdom. CDC will continue to communicate updates as new information about this variant becomes available,” the CDC said in a statement.

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.

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