

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Strain of Covid-19 First Reported in South Africa That Weakens Vaccine Efficacy Detected in U.S.

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Ernice Gilbert **January 31, 2021**



The Covid-19 variant [first reported in South Africa](#) that researchers say weakens the response of Covid-19 vaccines was detected in the U.S. for the first time on Thursday in South Carolina, said health officials in the state.

The variant, which is also as contagious as the strain first discovered in the U.K., was detected in two adults who have not traveled to South Africa and who are not connected to each other, health officials said. The discovery means that three variants are now circulating in the U.S.: the current dominant strain, the U.K. strain and the South African variant, with the latter already present in 30 countries.

Dr. Brannon Traxler, South Carolina's interim public-health director, said the virus's presence in the state serves as "an important reminder to all South Carolinians that the fight against this deadly virus is far from over. Every one of us must recommit to the fight by recognizing that we are all on the front lines now."

According to researchers, the South African variant diminishes the efficacy of the vaccines, though the vaccines still provide a level of protection. However, some Covid-19 treatments known as monoclonal antibodies might not work as well against the South African variant.

"Clearly, the mutants have a diminishing effect on the efficacy of the vaccines," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, said in a briefing ([via Reuters](#)). "We can see that we are going to be challenged."

Dr. Dan Barouch, a researcher at Harvard University Medical School's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, said, "It's a different pandemic now." Dr. Barouch, who helped develop the Johnson & Johnson vaccine that showed a 66 percent effectiveness overall in a massive trial spanning three continents, added that there are now a wide variety of new variants circulating, including in Brazil, South Africa and the United States, that are significantly resistant to vaccine-induced antibodies.

Pfizer Chief Executive Albert Bourla is quoted as stating that there was "a high possibility" that emerging variants may eventually render the company's vaccine ineffective.

"This is not the case yet," he said at the World Economic Forum. "But I think it's a very high likelihood that one day that will happen." Pfizer is determining whether its vaccine needs to be enhanced to defend against the South African variant.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, whose laboratories around the U.S. are boosting surveillance for the new variants, has recommended that Americans avoid international travel. Additionally, all air passengers coming into the country must now provide airlines a negative Covid-19 test result or proof of recovery before boarding a flight, the CDC said.

"CDC's recommendations for slowing the spread—wearing masks, staying at least 6 feet apart from others, avoiding crowds, ventilating indoor spaces, and washing hands often—will also prevent the spread of this variant," said the CDC.

The agency said recently that the U.K. variant is expected to become the dominant strain in the U.S. by March if efforts are not taken to mitigate spread.

The South African variant was first reported amidst a wave of new infections and rising Covid-19 related deaths in the South Africa. 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.

