

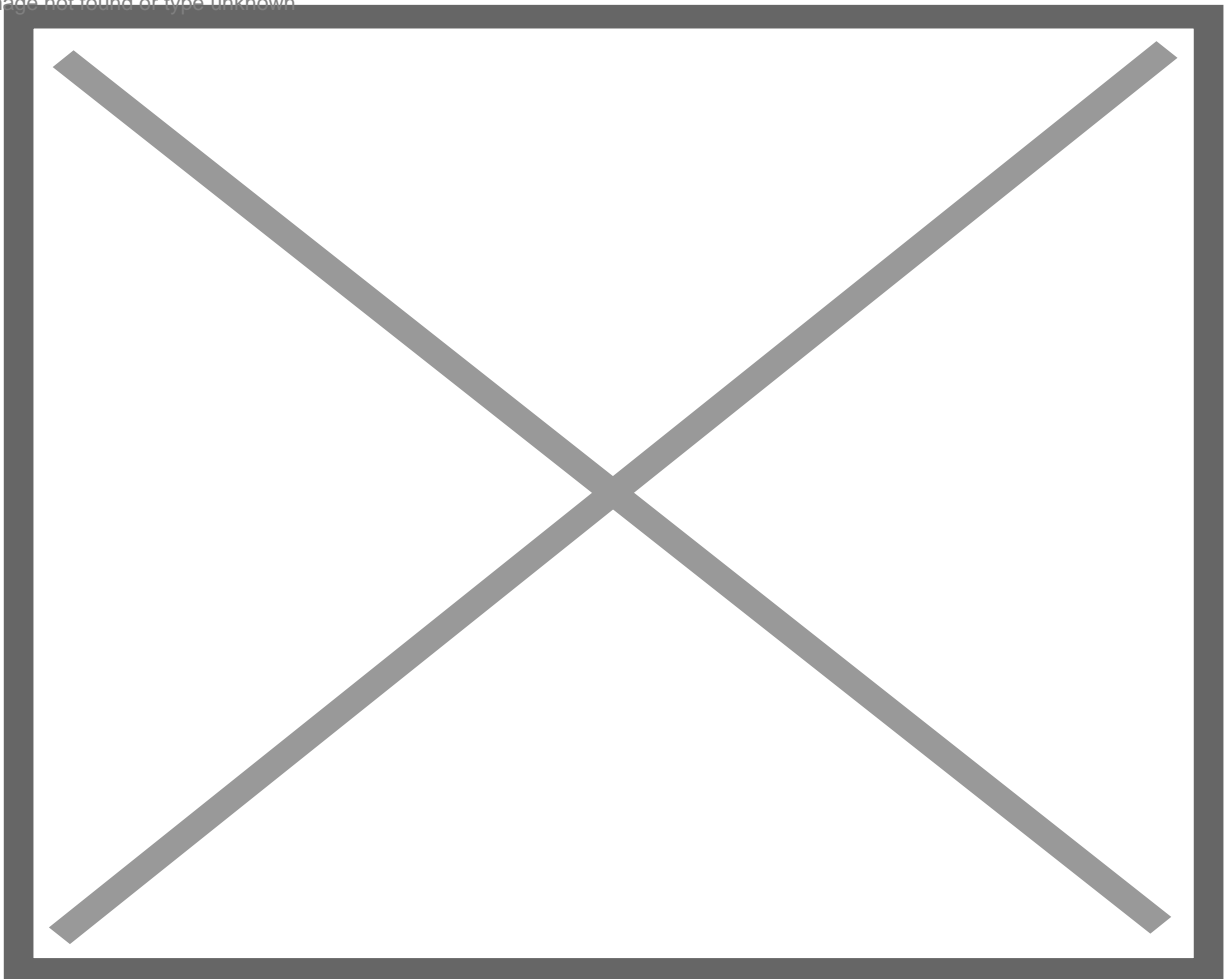
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19 Covid Samples From USVI Return Positive For Highly Contagious U.K. Variant in Preliminary Testing; Full Results to be Provided by Yale University Wednesday

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The V.I. Dept. of Health announced Monday that nineteen Covid-19 samples sent out for testing returned a preliminary positive result for the Covid-19 U.K. variant, the highly transmissible strain of the virulent disease that has since spread throughout the U.S. and other continents.

Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion made the announcement during the Bryan administration's Covid-19 press briefing Monday. "We recently announced the preliminary identification of the B117 Covid-19 variant, also called the UK variant. A total of nineteen of the samples came back with the preliminary result," she said.

"The B117 variant is more contagious but does not necessarily make those exposed sicker..." the commissioner added. She also said final results would be provided by Yale University on Wednesday.

The U.K. variant is believed to be up to 50 percent more contagious than the dominant 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 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.

A number of other strains have since emerged, including one from South Africa named B.1.351, which contains 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 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.

One of the more recent and trending strains, called Delta has been affecting the U.K. and has caused a delay to the long-awaited easing of Covid-induced restrictions in Britain. According to WSJ, the Delta variant is considerably more transmissible than older strains of the virus and the infection is more likely to result in hospitalization.

However, British data show that vaccines offer somewhat diminished protection against infection with the variant but substantial protection against severe illness, especially after the full two doses, according to WSJ. Almost 80 percent of adults have received at least one dose of vaccine in the U.K. and 57 percent are fully vaccinated. That compares with 64 percent and 54 percent in the U.S., respectively, wrote [the publication](#).