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27 Additional Covid Samples Test Positive For Highly Contagious U.K. Strain in Preliminary Results as Variant Gains Ground in USVI

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The V.I. Dept. of Health announced late Thursday that twenty-seven additional Covid samples have tested positive for the highly contagious U.K. variant — known formally as B.1.1.7. — in preliminary testing, a clear indication that the variant is gaining ground in the territory. "Confirmation is pending until next week. Those samples are from cases on St. Thomas and St. Croix," D.O.H. said.

Additionally, all 19 samples that had tested positive in preliminary results for the U.K. Covid-19 variant returned with definitive positive results after [being sent to Yale University for further examination](#).

In its release, the Dept. of Health said, "As new positive cases rise amongst unvaccinated individuals, there is a greater chance for the virus to mutate. These mutations can quickly spread across the islands and are known to be highly contagious."

D.O.H. said full sequencing has been conducted and these confirmatory results further underscore the importance of community immunity by way of vaccination. "B.1.1.7 is estimated to be 40%–80% (with most estimates occupying the middle to higher end of this range) more transmissible than the wild-type SARS-CoV-2, the original strain," stated the health department.

"Fortunately, we do not have the Delta strain in the territory yet. It has been identified in Puerto Rico in a traveler," the health department added. According to the Wall Street Journal, the Delta variant is considerably more transmissible than older strains of the virus and the infection is more likely to result in hospitalization.

D.O.H. said it monitors Covid-19 relations in neighboring islands as inter-island travel can add to the spread of the virus. Mutations can make the virus more virulent and could potentially cause it to be resistant to the vaccine in the future, the department said.

"The sooner more residents get vaccinated, the risk will decrease. It is important for everyone 12 and older to get the COVID-19 vaccine," D.O.H. said.

Relative to the U.K. variant, 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 much 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.

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 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.

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. 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](#).