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Delta Covid Variant May Be Present in U.S. Virgin Islands, Dept. of Health Announces; Department Says Unvaccinated People are Promoting Introduction of Harmful Variants

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The V.I. Dept. of Health announced Saturday night that the Delta variant of Covid-19 — now the world's most dominant strain — has possibly been identified in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

D.O.H. said it has been working with Yale University to test samples from positive Covid-19 cases, and so far 84 samples have shown to be variants from sequencing. Of the 84 cases, 65 have been of the Alpha variant (B.1.1.7) which is also known as “the UK Variant.” Six samples have been B.1.526.2 (Iota) OR B.1.351 (Beta), and one sample B.1.429 (Epsilon), according to the release.

Twelve samples are not confirmed to be any of the variants that have been previously identified in the USVI and may be the Delta variant that health officials have been very concerned about, D.O.H. said. Full sequencing results for those 12 samples will be available next week.

According to the Wall Street Journal, about half of adults infected in an outbreak of the Delta variant in Israel in July [were fully inoculated with the Pfizer Inc. vaccine](#). This reality prompted the Israeli government to reimpose an indoor mask requirement and other measures to contain the highly transmissible strain.

WSJ said preliminary findings by Israeli health officials suggest about 90 percent of new infections were likely caused by the Delta variant, according to Ran Balicer, who leads an expert advisory panel on Covid-19 for the government. Children under 16, most of whom haven't been vaccinated, accounted for about half of those infected, he said.

Scientists say the Delta Covid strain, or B.1.617.2 variant, appears to have two advantages over earlier forms of the virus: it is more infectious and appears to be more effective at evading vaccines, though people who are fully vaccinated have significant protection against Covid.

D.O.H. said it has previously reported on the Alpha variant which is estimated to be 40 percent –80 percent more transmissible than the wild-type original strain of SARS-CoV-2. The Delta variant is a SARS-CoV-2 mutation that originally surfaced in India in December 2020 and is highly contagious. It then swept rapidly throughout that region and throughout Great Britain as well. The first Delta case in the United States was confirmed in March and it is now the dominant strain in the U.S. with it reaching as close to USVI as Puerto Rico.

According to the release, health officials remain vigilant as they work to get more Virgin Islanders vaccinated. With more unvaccinated people in the territory, this will allow the virus to further mutate into more transmissible and deadlier variants, D.O.H. said. "This is worry for our small islands. But thankfully, the Covid-19 vaccine is very accessible," stated the release.

Anyone who is unvaccinated is more at risk of getting Covid-19, D.O.H. said. "The hesitancy or unwillingness to get vaccinated also harms our efforts to achieve community immunity and prevent the emergence of new variants that may be resistant to the vaccine," the department said.

Currently, 48.1 percent of the population is fully vaccinated. "For us to achieve community immunity, we need 70 percent of the population to be fully vaccinated," D.O.H. said.

D.O.H. Medical Director, Dr. Tai Hunte-Caesar, said, "Those who remain unvaccinated continue to drive the pandemic and promote the introduction of more harmful variants that risk the safety of all regardless of vaccination status."

Anyone 12 and older can get the COVID-19 vaccine by walking into any of our Community Vaccination Centers, by calling (340) 777-8227 or by scheduling yourself online at covid19usvi.com/vaccines. The COVID-19 vaccine has proven to save lives and as more people in our community get vaccinated, the chance of fast-spreading mutations affecting the territory decreases.

The department's epidemiology hotline remains open 7 days a week from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. for callers to report suspected cases of COVID-19 at (340) 712-6299 OR (340) 776-1519. We are also offering free vaccines at our pop-up testing sites weekly.

Individuals can also receive the vaccine at our Pop-Up locations. Anyone can pre-register for pop-up testing online at covid19usvi.com/testing. The following are our upcoming events:?

- St. Croix at the Charles Harwood Complex: Tuesday, July 20th from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
- St. Croix at the Charles Harwood Complex: Thursday, July 22nd from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
- St. Thomas at Home Depot: Tuesday, July 20th from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.
- St. Thomas at the Fort Christian Parking Lot Thursday, July 22nd from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.
- St. John at the VIPA Gravel Yard: Wednesday, July 21st from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Best practices such as hand washing, mask-wearing, and social distancing are still effective in preventing Covid-19. Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion encourages Virgin Islanders to remain alert and get the Covid-19 vaccine to stop the surge in new positive cases we have seen recently.