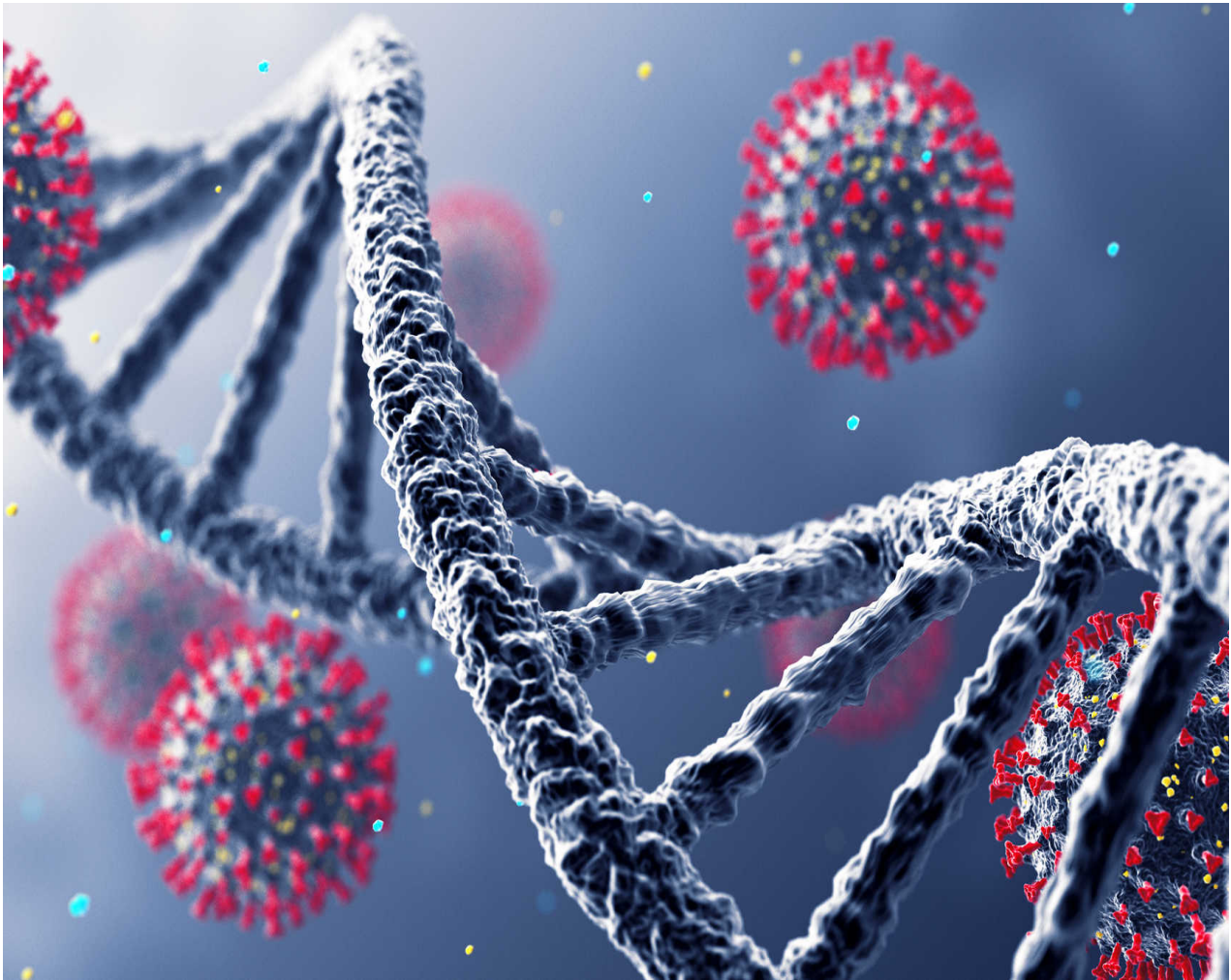


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Here's What We Know About the Fast-Spreading Covid-19 Variant Named Omicron

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The fast-spreading Omicron variant of Covid-19 has caused worldwide alarm among major nations, with concerns that the strain could be more transmissible than the highly contagious Delta variant and more virulent. From Europe to the U.S., governments have moved quickly to shut their borders to South Africa where the variant was first detected, and other African nations where it has been spotted in an effort to stop the spread.

But what, exactly is known about the Greek-alphabet named variant? Below, the information currently available about Omicron.

Has it been detected in the U.S.?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Omicron variant has not been identified in the U.S. "CDC is continuously monitoring variants and the U.S. variant surveillance system has reliably detected new variants in this country. We expect Omicron to be identified quickly, if it emerges in the U.S.," the CDC said in a statement Friday.

Where was it first detected?

The variant, also called B.1.1.529, was first reported to the World Health Organization from South Africa on 24 November. The epidemiological situation in South Africa has been characterized by three distinct peaks in reported cases, the latest of which was predominantly the Delta variant. In recent weeks, infections have increased steeply, coinciding with the detection of Omicron variant. The first known confirmed Omicron infection was from a specimen collected on 9 November, according to the WHO.

What's causing all this alarm about Omicron when others have not garnered such attention?

This variant has a large number of mutations, some of which are concerning. Preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection with this variant, as compared to other variants of concern, according to the WHO. The number of cases of this variant appears to be increasing in almost all provinces in South Africa. Current Covid-19 PCR testing continue to detect Omicron.

There are a number of studies underway and the WHO's Technical Advisory Group on Virus Evolution will continue to evaluate this variant. The WHO said it will communicate new findings with member states and to the public as needed.

Why was the variant named Omicron?

The WHO is designating Covid-19 variants with significance after letters of the Greek alphabet, and Omicron is the 15th letter.

Where aside from South African has the variant been detected?

Hong Kong, Israel and Belgium.

How effective are current vaccines against the Omicron variant?

The new strain has more than 50 mutations compared with the original virus first identified in Wuhan, China in 2019, according to South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases. More than 30 of those mutations are in the spike protein, through which the Covid-19 virus attaches to human cells. Additionally, several of the more than 30 spike proteins appear to be new, while others are already known to make the virus more contagious.

According to South Africa's health minister, the vaccines still offer some protection against severe illness and death, even if effectiveness against milder infections may have diminished. BioNTech SE, which has developed the most widely used vaccine along with Pfizer, said it would take about two weeks to determine whether the new variant renders the vaccine less effective.

