

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Pfizer Booster Shot Very Effective Against Omicron; U.K. Government Announces New Restrictions as Variant Spreads; No Cases Reported in USVI

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Pfizer and BioNTech, the makers of the most widely used Covid-19 vaccine announced Wednesday that there was significant loss of protection against the Omicron variant from a two-dose regimen of their vaccine, though it still manages to beat the virus against severe illness and hospitalization. The good news, the companies said, is that the booster shot (third dose) showed significant strength against Omicron, effectively neutralizing the strain of the virus.

The companies said a third dose of their vaccine increased antibodies 25-fold compared with two doses against the Omicron variant. Even with the two-dose regimen, the immune cells are able to recognize 80 percent of parts of the spike protein that the vaccine targets.

According to the companies' preliminary data, a third dose provides a similar level of neutralizing antibodies to Omicron as is observed after two doses against wild-type and other variants that emerged before Omicron. These antibody levels are associated with high efficacy against both the wild-type virus and these variants.

"Although two doses of the vaccine may still offer protection against severe disease caused by the Omicron strain, it's clear from these preliminary data that protection is improved with a third dose of our vaccine," said Albert Bourla, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Pfizer. "Ensuring as many people as possible are fully vaccinated with the first two dose series and a booster remains the best course of action to prevent the spread of Covid-19."

"Our preliminary, first dataset indicate that a third dose could still offer a sufficient level of protection from disease of any severity caused by the Omicron variant," said Ugur Sahin, M.D., CEO and Co-Founder of BioNTech. "Broad vaccination and booster campaigns around the world could help us to better protect people everywhere and to get through the winter season. We continue to work on an adapted vaccine, which we believe will help to induce a high level of protection against Omicron-induced Covid-19 disease as well as a prolonged protection compared to the current vaccine."

While these results are preliminary, the companies said they will continue to collect more laboratory data and evaluate real-world effectiveness to assess and confirm protection against Omicron and inform the most effective path forward.

On November 25, the companies started to develop an Omicron-specific Covid-19 vaccine. The development will continue as planned in the event that a vaccine adaption is needed to increase the level and duration of protection against Omicron.

First batches of the Omicron-based vaccine can be produced and are planned to be ready for deliveries within 100 days, pending regulatory approval. Pfizer and BioNTech have tested other variant-specific vaccines that have produced very strong neutralization titers and a tolerable safety profile. Based on this experience the companies have high confidence that if needed they can deliver an Omicron-based vaccine in March 2022.

England Announces New Restrictions

The United Kingdom on Wednesday announced new Covid-19 restrictions linked to Omicron as the fast-spreading variant takes hold in the country. The government warned that the variant has been doubling infections every two to three days, with reported cases jumping to 568, up 131 from Tuesday.

According to the Wall Street Journal, U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers in Parliament that public-health officials estimate the number of infections is around 20 times higher than the number of confirmed cases. "The number of infections is closer to 10,000," he said.

In light of the surge, the government has imposed new restrictions aimed at slowing the variant's spread. Among them working from home where possible and a requirement to show proof of vaccination for indoor venues such as nightclubs.

“We are seeing growth in cases here in the U.K. that now mirrors the rapid increases previously seen in South Africa,” said Mr. Johnson. “And South Africa has also seen hospitalizations roughly doubling in a week.”

No Cases of Omicron Reported Locally

Locally, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion told the Consortium Wednesday that the Omicron variant has not been detected in the territory. Even so, cases have once again seen a notable increase on the island of St. Croix, taking territorial numbers to 58 in total: 42 on St. Croix and 16 on St. Thomas as of Wednesday. There were no cases on St. John.