

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Vaccine-Evading Omicron Variant Spreading Rapidly in U.S.; Covid Cases on the Rise in USVI

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The extremely transmissible Omicron variant of Covid-19 is responsible for more than 70 percent of new infections in the U.S. for the week ending Dec. 18, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with states like New York setting daily infection records.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands cases have started increasing again, and although local health officials have not confirmed the variant, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion has said that it does not mean the variant — which has proven to evade vaccines and outpaces the Delta strain in transmissibility — has not been spreading in the territory.

The Omicron variant has reached 89 nations around the world since being identified in South African last month.

President Joe Biden will address the nation Tuesday as cities across the U.S. cancel planned holiday events in light of the variant's rapid spread. According to the CDC, Omicron is accounting for 90 percent of all new infections in some cities. To understand this rapid increase, on Dec. 11 CDC data showed Omicron at the time made up only 13 percent of all new infections.

For the fourth consecutive day, New York state has registered a record number of Covid-19 infections. The latest high was announced Monday, when 23,391 people tested positive for the virus. At the peak of the pandemic in 2020, when New York was one of the worst affected states, the peak was almost 19,000 infections.

According to the World Health Organization, Omicron is causing Covid-19 cases to double every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission, and the virus is also spreading rapidly in places with high vaccination rates.

Both the Pfizer and Moderna two-do shots — the most administered vaccines in the U.S. — have proven much weaker at preventing disease, though they may still prevent hospitalization and death. The companies' booster shots, however, have been better at combating the virus, according to both firms.

An encouraging sign is that while Omicron is proving more transmissible than the strains that came before, it is so far causing substantially less hospitalizations and deaths. According to the Wall Street Journal, Salim Abdool Karim, a clinical infectious-disease epidemiologist in South Africa, said hospital admission rates in the country's Omicron wave are much lower than during the previous Delta and Beta waves. Among those patients being admitted to the hospital, fewer are requiring ventilation, ICU care or dying, he said.

"I think the clinical picture we are seeing is one of substantially less severe disease," he said.

The USVI's total cases as of Monday was 72, [according](#) to the V.I. Dept. of Health, with St. Thomas starting to see increasing numbers after a long stretch of registering a low caseload. St. Croix had 49 active cases as of Monday, followed by St. Thomas with 22, and 1 on St. John.

The administration is expected to address concerns surrounding the variant during today's press briefing.