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## Dept. of Health Says it is 'Highly Likely' That Omicron is in USVI as Active Cases Surge to 247

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**A banner encouraging the use of masks on St. Croix at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport.  
By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM**

The V.I. Dept. of Health reported 101 new cases of Covid-19 in the territory Thursday, carrying the total throughout the islands to 247 active infections.

The surge in cases is most likely a result of the presence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant of Covid-19, according to Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, who on Thursday evening called for residents to follow guidelines as they get together with family and friends for the holidays.

"Based on the high numbers that we're seeing, it is highly likely, it is a high probability that our numbers are high because we have Omicron in the territory," Ms. Encarnacion told the Consortium Thursday. "And everyone should act as though we do have Omicron and keep themselves safe, because it's proven to be a very contagious virus."

The good news is that the Omicron variant is proving to cause drastically less severe illness than other strains before it, including Delta. The variant's less severe nature has been backed up by three major studies so far, one from [South Africa where the strain was first detected in late November, another by Scotland](#), and a third [from the United Kingdom](#). The South African study, published online by researchers at South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases, found people infected with Omicron were 70% to 80% less likely to need hospital treatment than people infected with earlier variants, including Delta, according to the Wall Street Journal.

In Scotland, 83.6% of people aged 12 and over have received two doses of vaccine, and 56.6% have received a third shot, WSJ said.

"One of the things that have been consistent is that [Omicron] is mild compared to Delta, so the number of hospitalizations and deaths are low, however the number of Covid-positive patients are higher," Ms. Encarnacion said.

She said the Department of Health has been working with Yale University on detecting the Omicron variant in the territory by sending samples to the institution, however she said the department would expand its efforts in the coming days to get faster results, as Yale has been inundated with requests.