Update on Omicron

Sunday, 28 November 2021

On 26 November 2021, WHO designated the variant B.1.1.529 a variant of concern, named Omicron, on the advice of WHO's Technical Advisory Group on Virus Evolution (TAG-VE). This decision was based on the evidence presented to the TAG-VE that Omicron has several mutations that may have an impact on how it behaves, for example, on how easily it spreads or the severity of illness it causes.

Here is a summary of what is currently known.

Current knowledge about Omicron

Researchers in South Africa and around the world are conducting studies to better understand many aspects of Omicron and will continue to share the findings of these studies as they become available.

Transmissibility: It is not yet clear whether Omicron is more transmissible (e.g., more easily spread from person to person) compared to other variants, including Delta. The number of people testing positive has risen in areas of South Africa affected by this variant, but epidemiologic studies are underway to understand if it is because of Omicron or other factors.

Severity of disease: It is not yet clear whether infection with Omicron causes more severe disease compared to infections with other variants, including Delta. Preliminary data suggests that there are increasing rates of hospitalization in South Africa, but this may be due to increasing overall numbers of people becoming infected, rather than a result of specific infection with Omicron. There is currently no information to suggest that symptoms associated with Omicron are different from those from other variants. Initial reported infections were among university studies—younger individuals who tend to have more mild

disease—but understanding the level of severity of the Omicron variant will take days to several weeks. All variants of COVID-19, including the Delta variant that is dominant worldwide, can cause severe disease or death, in particular for the most vulnerable people, and thus prevention is always key.

Effectiveness of prior SARS-CoV-2 infection

Preliminary evidence suggests there may be an increased risk of reinfection with Omicron (i.e. people who have previously had COVID-19 could become reinfected more easily with Omicron), as compared to other variants of concern, but information is limited. More information on this will become available in the coming days and weeks.

Effectiveness of vaccines: WHO is working with technical partners to understand the potential impact of this variant on our existing countermeasures, including vaccines. Vaccines remain critical to reducing severe disease and death, including against the dominant circulating virus, Delta. Current vaccines remain effective against severe disease and death.

Effectiveness of current tests: The widely used PCR tests continue to detect infection, including infection with Omicron, as we have seen with other variants as well. Studies are ongoing to determine whether there is any impact on other types of tests, including rapid antigen detection tests.

Effectiveness of current treatments: Corticosteroids and IL6 Receptor Blockers will still be effective for managing patients with severe COVID-19. Other treatments will be assessed to see if they are still as effective given the changes to parts of the virus in the Omicron variant.

Studies underway

At the present time, WHO is coordinating with a large number of researchers around the world to better understand Omicron. Studies currently underway or underway shortly include assessments of transmissibility, severity of infection (including symptoms), performance of vaccines and diagnostic tests, and effectiveness of treatments.

WHO encourages countries to contribute the collection and sharing of hospitalized patient data through the WHO COVID-19 Clinical Data Platform to rapidly describe clinical characteristics and patient outcomes.

More information will emerge in the coming days and weeks. WHO's TAG-VE will continue to monitor and evaluate the data as it becomes available and assess how mutations in Omicron alter the behaviour of the virus.

Recommended actions for countries

As Omicron has been designated a Variant of Concern, there are several actions WHO recommends countries to undertake, including enhancing surveillance and sequencing of cases; sharing genome sequences on publicly available databases, such as GISAID; reporting initial cases or clusters to WHO; performing field investigations and laboratory assessments to better understand if Omicron has different transmission or disease characteristics, or impacts effectiveness of vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics or public health and social measures. More detail in the announcement from 26 November.

Countries should continue to implement the effective public health measures to reduce COVID-19 circulation overall, using a risk analysis and science-based approach. They should increase some public health and medical capacities to manage an increase in cases. WHO is providing countries with support and guidance for both readiness and response.

In addition, it is vitally important that inequities in access to COVID-19 vaccines are urgently addressed to ensure that vulnerable groups everywhere, including health workers and older persons, receive their first and second doses, alongside equitable access to treatment and diagnostics.

Recommended actions for people

The most effective steps individuals can take to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus is to keep a physical distance of at least 1 metre from others; wear a well-fitting mask; open windows to improve ventilation; avoid poorly ventilated or crowded spaces; keep hands clean; cough or sneeze into a bent elbow or tissue; and get vaccinated when it's their turn.

WHO will continue to provide updates as more information becomes available, including following meetings of the TAG-VE. In addition, information will be available on WHO's digital and social media platforms.