



## COVID-19 OMICRON VARIANT FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS December 29, 2021

### **Omicron Variant Frequently Asked Questions:**

#### ***What is the Omicron Variant?***

The Omicron Variant (B.1.1.529) currently accounts for the majority of new infections in the United States. The strain was originally identified in Botswana and South Africa in November 2021. It contains over 30 mutations in the “spike protein” thought to increase its infectivity and ability to evade the immune system. Preliminary data indicates that Omicron can cause a second COVID-19 infection in people previously diagnosed with COVID-19. Omicron’s rapid global spread has caused the Centers for Disease control to quickly update vaccine and quarantine guidelines in the United States.

#### ***What are the key characteristics of the Omicron Variant?***

Omicron Variant appears to evade certain immune pathways in the body and is associated with a much higher reinfection risk in patients previously infected with other coronavirus strains. Early data suggests that symptoms of primary or reinfection may be less than with other variants. Preliminary reports from South Africa indicate lower severity of illness with patients requiring less supplemental oxygen need and having shorter hospitalizations. Unfortunately, existing treatments (vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, antiviral medications) may be less effective in combating progression of disease.

#### ***Are the symptoms different?***

Some preliminary data suggest that the symptoms may be slightly different than other variants, but this will require more study. Headache, sore throat, myalgias, fatigue and runny nose are now among the most frequently reported symptoms. Fever and cough were less severe. Vaccinated patients report much milder symptoms. Taste and smell abnormalities do not seem to be nearly as common as seen with previous strains. Importantly, Omicron can cause a wide range of symptoms which cannot be differentiated from other variants or other respiratory viruses. Importantly, many individuals display no or minimal symptoms and yet can transmit the virus to others.

#### ***Are vaccines still effective?***

**Vaccines remain effective** but concerns of waning immunity in those having received a primary vaccination series have led to widespread recommendations of boosting with an additional dose of mRNA vaccine (Moderna/Pfizer). Preliminary studies show a roughly 30% vaccine efficacy increased to over 70% against Omicron variant after receiving a booster. Ongoing trials suggest Johnson and Johnson booster may also be particularly effective against the variant. Regardless, vaccines show a clear role in preventing severe symptoms and hospitalization. Efforts to increase boosters has become a clear CDC objective and should be strongly considered by those eligible.



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### ***Does Omicron require different testing?***

Currently all known variants of interest and concern are detectable with existing approved tests. Although the levels of sensitivity and specificity vary across the different testing platforms and modalities, these tests do not need to be altered to detect Omicron. A handful of nucleic acid testing modalities were unable to detect the variant; they are currently being held by distributors. Home testing can detect Omicron with similar ability as for other strains.

### ***If I'm fully vaccinated, what can I do (per CDC)?***

- If eligible, a booster is recommended by the CDC.
- If infected, discuss new treatment options with your healthcare provider. These seem particularly effective in preventing milder infections becoming more severe and reducing hospitalization.
- Resume domestic travel and refrain from testing before or after travel and from self-quarantine after travel.
- Refrain from testing before leaving the United States for international travel (unless required by the destination) and refrain from self-quarantine after arriving back in the United States.
- Refrain from routine screening testing if feasible.

### ***What precautions do I need to take even if vaccinated (per CDC)?***

- Wear a mask in public indoor settings if you live in an area of high disease prevalence. Follow local health department recommendations.
  - Fully vaccinated people might choose to mask regardless of the level of transmission, particularly if they or someone in their household is immunocompromised or at increased risk for severe disease or if someone in their household is unvaccinated. People who are at increased risk for severe disease include older adults and those who have certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, and heart conditions.
- Get tested if experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.
- Newer recommendations for quarantine and isolation after infection and exposure were released by the CDC December 27, 2021. These apply to the general population with a separate list for healthcare providers.
- Follow any applicable federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations.