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ICHE NEWSLETTER
INFECTION CONTROL & HOSPITAL EPIDEMIOLOGY

Omicron Variant: What You Need to Know
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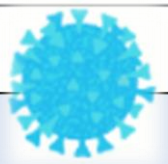

Omicron - B.1.1.529

- First identified: South Africa
- Spread: May spread more easily than other variants, including Delta.
- Severe illness and death: Due to the small number of cases, the current severity of illness and death associated with this variant is unclear.
- Vaccine: Breakthrough infections in people who are fully vaccinated are expected, but vaccines are effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalizations, and death. Early evidence suggests that fully vaccinated people who become infected with the Omicron variant can spread the virus to others. All FDA-approved or authorized vaccines are expected to be effective against severe illness, hospitalizations, and deaths. The recent emergence of the Omicron variant further emphasizes the importance of vaccination and boosters.

Why is Omicron a variant of concern?

All viruses, including the COVID-19 virus, change over time and this is a natural phenomenon. However, some mutations or combinations of mutations may change the way the virus behaves. Omicron is of concern because it has a large number of mutations, some of which have been associated with potential increased transmissibility and possible immune escape – that mean , there is a chance people may get infected by it even if they have developed some natural immunity from previous COVID-19 infection, or following COVID-19 vaccination.

Is Omicron worse than Delta?

- That's not yet clear, nor how, if so. Omicron does appear to be driving rapid spread in a country (South Africa) where Delta has been dominant, though a number of factors could have contributed to that spread.

- In addition, whatever happens with Omicron, Delta is still wreaking plenty of havoc all over the world on its own, especially among the unvaccinated. Omicron might be new, but Delta remains the most dangerous variant in the world.

What can we do as individuals to stop the virus circulating?

There is a range of proven measures that we should continue taking to protect ourselves against COVID-19 and all its variants, namely:
•Getting vaccinated (including a booster shot) to be protected from severe illness and death . Vaccines also reduce virus circulation, and reducing the chances for a new mutation that could hit us harder. We need more people to be vaccinated, everywhere.
•Combining vaccination with other protective measures as a matter of routine to further reduce our risk of exposure and prevent ourselves from passing the virus on to others – including:

- wearing mask
- maintaining physical distance
- improving ventilation of indoor spaces
- avoiding crowded, confined and closed settings
- regularly cleaning hands
- coughing or sneezing into a bent elbow or tissue.