What patients may ask about the emerging COVID-19 Omicron variant

DEC 2, 2021

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As the U.S. continues to struggle with the dangerous COVID-19 Delta variant, a new SARS-CoV-2 strain has emerged: Omicron. While much remains unknown about the transmissibility and severity of the new variant—and how effective the currently approved and authorized COVID-19 vaccines will be in protecting people against it—doctors, scientists and public health officials are working hard to better understand the Omicron variant.

While there are still many unknowns, here are some questions patients may have about the emerging COVID-19 Omicron variant.

What is the Omicron variant of COVID-19?

First reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by South Africa, B.1.1.529 was classified as a variant of concern and named Omicron on Nov. 24. This prompted the U.S. and several other countries to restrict travel to and from South Africa.

The first U.S. case of the Omicron variant was identified in an individual in California. This individual, who was fully vaccinated, traveled from South Africa on November 22 and tested positive for COVID-19 on November 29. The person is reported to have mild illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has not yet followed the WHO’s classification of “variant of concern.”

“We are working with other U.S. and global public health and industry partners to learn more about this variant, as we continue to monitor its path,” a CDC statement said. “The U.S. variant surveillance system has reliably detected new variants in this country..”

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What makes Omicron a variant of concern?

In recent weeks, COVID-19 infections in South Africa saw a steep increase, coinciding with the detection of the COVID-19 Omicron variant. What makes this variant concerning is the number of mutations, which may have an impact on how easily Omicron spreads or the severity of illness it causes, says the WHO.

Learn more from the CDC about what you need to know about variants.

How contagious is the Omicron variant of COVID-19?

Since the Omicron variant is still new, the WHO has noted that it is not yet clear whether this COVID-19 variant is more easily spread from person to person. This is compared with other variants, including Delta.

While the number of people who have tested positive for COVID-19 has risen in areas of South Africa affected by Omicron, epidemiologic studies are currently underway to better understand whether that is because of the variant itself or is driven by other factors.

Does Omicron cause more severe disease?

Again, it is not yet clear whether infection from the COVID-19 Omicron variant causes more severe disease. But preliminary data does suggest that the rates of hospitalization in South Africa have been increasing. While this is concerning, it may be due to an overall increase in the number of people becoming infected rather than infection with Omicron, says the WHO.

What are the symptoms of the Omicron variant?

There is no information to suggest that symptoms associated with Omicron are different from other variants. The initial reports of infections, according to the WHO, were among university students who tend to have milder symptoms. Understanding the true level of severity of the Omicron variant could take several weeks.

Read an update on Omicron from the WHO, including transmissibility and severity.
Is there an increased risk of reinfection?

While research is ongoing, preliminary evidence suggests that there might be an increased risk of reinfection with the COVID-19 Omicron variant. This means that people who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 and recovered can become reinfected more easily with Omicron, according to the WHO. More information will become available in the upcoming weeks.

Are COVID-19 vaccines effective against Omicron?

The CDC and WHO are working to better understand the potential impact of the Omicron variant on existing countermeasures. This analysis of Omicron variant vaccine efficacy includes the COVID-19 vaccines and boosters from Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson.

“Emergence of the Omicron variant further emphasizes the importance of vaccination, boosters and prevention efforts needed to protect against COVID-19,” said CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, MD, MPH. “Early data from South Africa suggest increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, and scientists in the United States and around the world are urgently examining vaccine effectiveness related to this variant.”

Should I get the COVID-19 vaccine or booster shot?

It is imperative that everyone who is not fully vaccinated against COVID-19 should get vaccinated with one of the three available vaccines. And those who are fully vaccinated should get a booster shot for added protection against COVID-19 variants Omicron, Delta and others.

“I strongly encourage the 47 million adults who are not yet vaccinated to get vaccinated as soon as possible and to vaccinate the children and teens in their families as well because strong immunity will likely prevent serious illness,” Dr. Walensky said. “I also want to encourage people to get a COVID-19 test if they are sick. Increased testing will help us identify Omicron quickly.”

Discover what doctors wish patients knew about COVID-19 vaccine boosters.

The AMA strongly supports vaccination of all who are eligible to protect against the worst outcomes of COVID-19. Among other things, the AMA supports COVID-19 vaccine mandates by employers and appropriate take-up of COVID-19 vaccine booster shots.

Additionally, the AMA has developed frequently-asked-questions documents on COVID-19
vaccination covering safety, allocation and distribution, administration and more. There are two FAQs, one designed to answer patients’ questions (PDF), and another to address physicians’ COVID-19 vaccine questions (PDF).