

Community Update  
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Variants of Concern  
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As we celebrate the season with friends and family this year, we are once again seeing this tenacious virus, COVID-19, making new headlines. Last week, the first detected case of the Omicron variant in Virginia was found in the northwestern part of the state. This news was not unexpected, as the variant has also been identified in over 25 other states at the time of writing.

**Q: What is a variant?**

A: Viruses continually change (mutate) and these changes can lead to new variants (“strain”) of the virus. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is no exception. As long as the virus continues to circulate, there is a chance that it will give rise to a new variant. In 2020, the primary circulating strain of SARS-CoV-2 was the Alpha variant. In 2021, the Delta variant emerged as the predominant strain in the United States, including in Virginia. The Delta strain is more contagious than the Alpha strain which is one of the reasons so many people continue to get COVID-19. And, as many of you know, as we headed into the holiday season, we learned of the Omicron variant which is even more contagious than the Delta variant.

**Q: Is Omicron a more dangerous variant?**

A: Because this is a very new variant with a lot of different mutations, there is still a lot that we need to learn. We need to learn more about its transmissibility, severity, and ability to evade immune responses (including response to vaccine). We need to be patient as more information emerges about this new variant. Just because we have a new variant doesn’t mean we have a crisis in our midst but it does mean that we cannot let our guard down against this ever-changing virus.

**Q: What kind of protection do the vaccines provide against the variants?**

A: The good news is that the COVID-19 vaccines available in the U.S. are safe and are effective at decreasing the risk of infection as well as severe disease (hospitalizations/ death) associated with Alpha and Delta variants. Initial information shows that for the Omicron strain, the vaccines also decrease the risk of severe disease in people who are fully vaccinated, particularly in individuals who have received their booster shots. We strongly encourage everyone over the age of 16 to get a booster shot if it has been at least 6 months since their second dose of Pfizer/Moderna, or for people over the age of 18 years, at least two months since their dose of J&J.

**Q: Is there anything a person can do to avoid getting sick with Omicron?**

A: After almost two years of learning to live with this virus, we have really good evidence that community mitigation strategies, such as masking and social distancing, work against *all* variants.

The Virginia Department of Health is actively tracking and investigating the Omicron variant and will continue to update the public as information unfolds. Until we learn more about this new variant, there are steps to take that we know will work: Getting vaccinated and boosted, plus wearing a mask in public indoor settings, remain the best ways to protect yourself and the people around you. Please be safe and stay healthy as we usher in a New Year!