Unwelcome Omicron

It seems like the Coronavirus still has a few nasty tricks up its sleeve. The latest is what has been called the Omicron variant, a new strain of the virus with multiple mutations that may enable it to spread more quickly than even the Delta variant that caused an unexpected pandemic resurgence. The new variant, formally called B.1.1.529, is actually the 13th version of Covid identified by the World Health Organization, even though omicron is the 15th letter in the Greek alphabet. (For various reasons, the WHO decided to skip Nu (too easily mistaken for ‘new’) and Xi (a common surname in China, including the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping) and proceed directly to Omicron.

13 variants? Most of the mutated forms of the virus—like the ones designated Epsilon, Iota and Lambda—fizzed out without infecting a great many people. The current vaccinations seem to have worked effectively against them, but scientists are unsure whether a new vaccine will be required to protect against Omicron. The single U.S. citizen who has tested positive for the new variant was fully vaccinated but got the disease anyway; however, he is experiencing only mild symptoms, similar to what some vaccinated people have experienced when they caught a breakthrough case of the Delta variant.

Twelve other countries—Australia, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, South Africa and the United Kingdom—have now reported at least one Omicron case. This suggests that the current COVID-19 tests are accurately picking up the new variant, though scientists still have to do a genome sequencing analysis to confirm which variant the patient is infected with.

Today, the Delta variant accounts for nearly all U.S. Coronavirus cases, in part because its underlying structure diverged enough from the Alpha variant that the vaccinations were not able to completely suppress it. Omicron has even more divergent mutations from the original version that the vaccines were designed for, which may or may not mean current vaccines are effective against it. All we know at this point is that the variant emerged in South Africa, and the country has suddenly seen climbing infections and hospitalizations in recent weeks. The people infected don’t seem to be experiencing worse or different symptoms from Delta-infected patients; what’s troubling is how many vaccinated people are catching the disease compared with other strains.

The worst-case scenario is that Omicron is what scientists call a ‘vaccine-escape variant,’ which could mean anything from vaccinated people are more likely to catch this version than the previous 12 (but with mild symptoms) to a more deadly outbreak that is not slowed by vaccinations. The South African experience suggests the former is more likely than the latter, but nobody knows for sure. And if the worst-case scenario manifests, then Pfizer and BioNTech have said that they could produce a tailor-made, Omicron-targeted vaccine in about 100 days. Moderna expects an Omicron-specific booster to be in the testing stage within three months.

The most important thing to understand about Omicron’s emergence is that the Coronavirus appears to be here to stay, an unwelcome part of our lives similar to the annual flu, and people may need annual booster vaccinations for new strains going forward. We may be wearing masks in public places and dining outdoors for the foreseeable future, and the World Health Organization is likely to run out of Greek letters before we have finally banished the pandemic from our lives.

Sources:

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