



Situation

The virus causing COVID-19 has been changing over time. This is common for all viruses.

The SARS CoV-2 variant 202012/01 was first detected in the United Kingdom and is now found in a number of countries across the WHO European Region. This variant is “of concern” as it appears to spread more easily between people.

The variant of concern (VOC) spreads across all age groups and children do not appear to be at higher risk compared to other age groups. However, with increased transmissibility, the variant does raise concern: if we do not continue our efforts and redouble the measures to slow its spread, there will be a higher impact on already stressed and pressurized health facilities.

This means increasing, once more, countries’ efforts at public health and social measures that are proven to work, such as testing, isolating and treating cases, contact

tracing and quarantine. For the general public, it means further intensifying protective measures such as hand hygiene, physical distancing and wearing a mask when needed.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe advises every country to carefully assess the local epidemiological situation and adapt measures accordingly.

The Regional Office also advises countries to increase sequencing and data sharing via the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID), the global science initiative providing open access to genomic data of influenza and COVID-19 viruses, with new mutations being reported to WHO via the network of national focal points of the International Health Regulations (IHR).

Virus variants: a common phenomenon

When a virus replicates or makes copies of itself, it sometimes changes a little bit. These changes are called “mutations”. A virus with one or several new mutations is referred to as a “variant” of the original virus.

Some viruses change quickly and others more slowly. SARS-CoV-2, the virus which causes COVID-19, tends to change more slowly than others such as HIV or influenza viruses. This could in part be explained by the virus’s internal “proofreading mechanism”, which can correct “mistakes” when it makes copies of itself. Scientists continue to study this mechanism to better understand how it works.

The more viruses circulate, the more they may change. These changes can occasionally result in a virus variant that is better adapted to its environment compared to the original virus. This process of changing and selection of successful variants is called “virus evolution”.

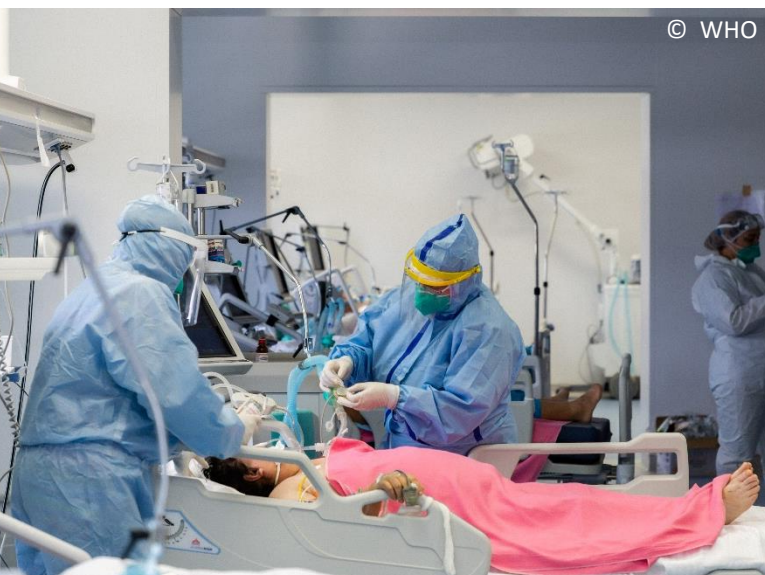
Variant of concern: higher transmissibility

There have, so far, been hundreds of variations of SARS-CoV-2 identified worldwide and WHO has been following them very closely. So far, most variants of the virus behave nearly identically to the original: they spread in the same way, with the same speed, and cause the same amount and severity of disease.

For two recently detected variants, this appears to be different: preliminary signs indicate that they may be able to spread more easily between people. The two variants were first detected in the United Kingdom (technical name VOC 202012/01, for variant of concern, year 2020, month 12, variant 01) and South Africa (technical name variant 501Y.V2 for the place in the genome where the mutation took place), and have since been detected in a number of other countries. To understand the specific mutations, WHO advises that further virological studies be conducted.

Effectiveness of existing vaccines

There is currently no evidence that the available vaccines are any less effective in preventing circulating variants than in SARS-CoV-2. However, this is subject to further investigations. In general, vaccination will reduce future mutations and variants overall, by limiting circulation of the virus and thus limiting the opportunity for new mutations.



Actions

The WHO Regional Office for Europe is supporting Member States throughout the Region in their response to the new VOC in a number of areas. These include:

- coordination and planning;
- risk communication and community engagement;
- surveillance, rapid response, case investigation and contact tracing;
- points of entry, international travel and transport;
- national laboratories.