

Talking Points & QA

1. What is a COVID-19 variant?

A variant is a new strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus with a specific number of gene mutations that make it unique from the original strain identified.

2. Are mutations among viruses common?

Yes. Viruses constantly change through mutation and new variants are expected to occur over time. Multiple variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the virus that causes COVID-19, have been documented in the United States and globally during this pandemic. Most variants do not change how the virus behaves and many disappear. It is possible, however, that mutations can help a virus spread more easily, can cause infection to be more or less severe, or can lead to resistance to treatments or vaccines. Variant B.1.1.7 appears to be more contagious than other strains, which is why it has been getting a lot of attention.

3. How are new variants identified?

This is done using a process called whole genome sequencing. Whole genome sequencing takes a sample of the virus and reads the genetic code, the RNA. By doing this, unique strains of the virus are able to be identified.

4. Does the state screen for COVID-19 variants?

Wisconsin DHS, the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene, and other laboratory partners regularly work together to ensure whole genome sequencing is performed on a small proportion of positive tests. Mutations among viruses are very common - it's expected to occur in all viruses, including COVID-19.

5. How was this variant discovered in WI?

DHS and its laboratory partners are collaborating with CDC to conduct SARS-CoV-2 Strain Surveillance, to build a collection of virus specimens and sequences. Clinicians were asked to support this activity by promptly notifying DHS of individuals who have a positive PCR test result and met any of the following criteria:

- Have traveled to another county within the previous 30 days.

- Have been in close contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19 after traveling to another country in the previous 30 days.
- Prolonged clinical illnesses, including those who are suspected of having protracted SARS-CoV-2 viral replication, are immunocompromised, or who have a recurrence of COVID-19 disease after an initial period of recovery.
- Suspected repeat infection occurring in patients who received monoclonal antibody therapy, convalescent plasma therapy, or antiviral drugs including remdesivir.
- Any SARS-CoV-2 infection in an individual who has received a COVID-19 vaccine.

6. What does it mean that the variant is more transmissible?

It can spread more easily from person to person. There are ongoing studies happening to determine how much more transmissible the new strain is compared to other circulating strains. Preliminary research out of the United Kingdom suggests this new variant, B.1.1.7, is more infectious than existing strains of COVID-19. As we continue to sequence COVID-19 specimens and look for this new variant, it is more important than ever to do your part to stop the spread - continue to stay home, wear a mask, wash your hands, and physically distance.

7. What are the consequences of a virus that spreads more easily?

A higher rate of transmission could lead to more cases, which would increase the number of people overall who need clinical care. It may also impact the number of those who need to be vaccinated to fully disrupt community transmission when vaccines become widely available.

8. Does the new variant cause more severe illness or increased risk of death?

Currently, there is no evidence to support that this variant causes more severe illness or increase risk of death.

9. Will the current vaccine protect against the new COVID-19 variant?

Most likely yes. There is no evidence to suggest that COVID-19 vaccines will not work with new variants. It is unlikely that

mutations occurring in this short period of time would change the virus enough that the vaccine would be ineffective. So far, the vaccine appears to be successful with other existing variants. However, studies of vaccine efficacy are ongoing.

10. The new COVID-19 variant in South Africa is supposedly more contagious than the UK strain. Should we worry about these strains coming to Wisconsin?

It is possible that these new strains will reach Wisconsin. We have been doing whole genome sequencing on a small proportion of COVID-19 tests since the beginning of the pandemic to look out for new variants. The early research that suggests several emerging strains are more contagious is to be taken seriously. It reinforces how important it is to do your part to stop the spread - by staying home, wearing a mask, washing your hands, and maintaining physical distance.