

South Africa testing whether vaccines work against variant

January 4 2021, by Andrew Meldrum



A wine store in Cape Town, South Africa, displays a closed sign at its entrance Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2020. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has declared the wearing of masks compulsory and has reimposed a ban on the sales of alcohol and ordered the closure of all bars and beaches as part of new restrictions to help the country battle a resurgence of the coronavirus, including a new variant. (AP Photo/Nardus Engelbrecht)

Scientists in South Africa are urgently testing to see if the vaccines for COVID-19 will be effective against the country's variant virus.

The [genomic studies](#) come as Britain's health minister, Matt Hancock, and other experts in the U.K. have said they worry that vaccines may not be effective against the South African variant.

"This is the most pressing question facing us right now," said Dr. Richard Lessells, an infectious diseases expert who is working on the country's genomic studies of the variant.

"We are urgently doing experiments in the laboratory to test the variant," against the blood of people with antibodies and against the blood of people who have received vaccines, Lessells told The Associated Press Monday.

The tests, called neutralizing assays, will help determine the reliability of vaccines against the variant, he said.

The South African variant, 501.V2, is more infectious than the original COVID-19 virus and has rapidly become dominant in the country's coastal areas. It is expected that the variant will quickly become dominant inland in Johannesburg, the country's largest city, and the surrounding Gauteng province, he said.

South Africa is currently experiencing a resurgence of COVID-19 with rapidly rising numbers of cases and deaths that are surpassing what the country experienced in its first surge in late July last year.



Stacked beach chairs lay on the closed beach in Camps Bay, Cape Town, South Africa Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2020. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has declared the wearing of masks compulsory and has reimposed a ban on the sales of alcohol and ordered the closure of all bars and beaches as part of new restrictions to help the country battle a resurgence of the coronavirus, including a new variant. (AP Photo/Nardus Engelbrecht)



People pass a sign at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa, indicating a COVID testing station Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2020. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has declared the wearing of masks compulsory and has reimposed a ban on the sales of alcohol and ordered the closure of all bars and beaches as part of new restrictions to help the country battle a resurgence of the coronavirus, including a new variant. (AP Photo/Nardus Engelbrecht)

South Africa has recorded more than 1.1 million cases of COVID-19, including 29,577 deaths, according to Monday figures from the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

South Africa's seven-day rolling average of daily new cases has risen over the past two weeks from 14.68 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 20 to 23.20 new cases per 100,000 people on Jan. 3. The rolling

average of daily deaths has doubled over the past two weeks from 0.34 deaths per 100,000 people on Dec. 20 to 0.68 deaths per 100,000 people on Jan. 3.

As South Africa's hospitals neared capacity, President Cyril Ramaphosa last week announced a return to restrictions designed to slow the spread of the disease, including a ban on the sales of liquor and the closure of many public beaches and banning public gatherings.

The COVID-19 virus is prone to mutations and the creation of new variants, Lessells said.

"As more genomic surveillance is done and better genomic surveillance is done, we will almost certainly see more variants in other parts of the world," he said.

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