

New omicron variant stokes world fears, triggers travel bans

November 26 2021, by Raf Casert



Time	Airline	Destination	Flight Number	Notes
17:30	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Düsseldorf	BA932	Drop bags from 13:20
17:30	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Vancouver	BA085	Drop bags from 12:30
17:30	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Zurich	LA5579	Drop bags from 13:30
17:35	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Aberdeen	IB7532	C
17:55	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Amsterdam	KQ4014	Drop bags from 13:55
18:15	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Cape Town	IB7311	Contact Airline
18:15	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Male	BA061	Drop bags from 13:15
18:15	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Geneva	LA5573	Drop bags from 14:15
18:20	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Johannesburg	IB7317	Cancelled
18:20	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Newcastle	QR5910	Drop bags from 12:20
18:25	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Hong Kong	BA027	Drop bags from 13:25
18:25	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Manchester	QR6249	Drop bags from 12:25
18:45	BRITISH AIRWAYS	Milan (LIN)	KQ4024	Drop bags from 14:45

A departures screen displays a cancelled flight to Johannesburg and a message to contact the airline for a scheduled flight to Capetown, at London's Heathrow Airport, Friday, Nov. 26, 2021. The U.K. announced that it was banning flights from South Africa and five other southern African countries effective at noon on Friday, and that anyone who had recently arrived from those countries would be asked to take a coronavirus test. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

The discovery of [a new coronavirus variant](#) sent a chill through much of the world Friday as nations raced to halt air travel, markets fell sharply and scientists held emergency meetings to weigh the exact risks, which were largely unknown.

A World Health Organization panel named the variant "omicron" and classified it as a highly transmissible virus of concern, the same category that includes the delta variant, the world's most prevalent. The panel said early evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection.

In response, the United States joined the European Union and several other countries in instituting travel restrictions on visitors from southern Africa.

The White House said the U.S. will restrict travel from South Africa and seven other countries in the region beginning Monday. It did not give details except to say the restrictions will not apply to returning U.S. citizens or permanent residents, who will continue to be required to test negative before their travel.

Medical experts, including the WHO, warned against any overreaction before the variant that originated in southern Africa was better understood. But a jittery world feared the worst nearly two years after COVID-19 emerged and triggered a pandemic that has killed more than 5 million people around the globe.



People wait to get vaccinated at a shopping mall, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday Nov. 26, 2021. Advisers to the World Health Organization are holding a special session Friday to flesh out information about a worrying new variant of the coronavirus that has emerged in South Africa, though its impact on COVID-19 vaccines may not be known for weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Farrell

"We must move quickly and at the earliest possible moment," British Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers.

There was no immediate indication whether the variant causes more severe disease. As with other variants, some infected people display no symptoms, South African experts said. The WHO panel drew from the Greek alphabet in naming the variant omicron, as it has done with

earlier, major variants of the virus.

Even though some of the genetic changes appear worrisome, it was unclear if the new variant would pose a significant public health threat. Some previous variants, like the beta variant, initially concerned scientists but did not spread very far.

The 27-nation European Union imposed a temporary ban on air travel from southern Africa, and stocks tumbled in Asia, Europe and the United States. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped more than 1,000 points. The S&P 500 index was down 2.3%, on pace for its worst day since February. The price of oil plunged nearly 12%.

"The last thing we need is to bring in a new variant that will cause even more problems," German Health Minister Jens Spahn said. The member nations of the EU have experienced a [massive spike in cases recently](#).



People queue to get vaccinated at a shopping mall, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday Nov. 26, 2021. Advisers to the World Health Organization are holding a special session Friday to flesh out information about a worrying new variant of the coronavirus that has emerged in South Africa, though its impact on COVID-19 vaccines may not be known for weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Farrell

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said flights will have to "be suspended until we have a clear understanding about the danger posed by this new variant, and travelers returning from this region should respect strict quarantine rules."

She insisted on extreme caution, warning that "mutations could lead to the emergence and spread of even more concerning variants of the virus

that could spread worldwide within a few months."

Belgium became the first European Union country to announce a case of the variant.

"It's a suspicious variant," Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke said. "We don't know if it's a very dangerous variant."

It has yet to be detected in the United States, said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious disease expert. Abroad, the variant "seems to be spreading at a reasonably rapid rate," he told CNN. And although it may be more transmissible and resistant to vaccines than other variants, "we don't know that for sure right now."



People shop in a mall, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday Nov. 26, 2021. Advisers to the World Health Organization are holding a special session Friday to flesh out information about a worrying new variant of the coronavirus that has emerged in South Africa, though its impact on COVID-19 vaccines may not be known for weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Farrell

Showing how complicated the spread of a variant can be, the Belgian case involved a traveler who returned to Belgium from Egypt on Nov. 11 but did not become sick with mild symptoms until Monday, according to professor Marc Van Ranst, who works for the scientific group overseeing the Belgian government's COVID-19 response.

Israel, one of the world's most vaccinated countries, announced Friday that it also detected its first case of the new variant in a traveler who returned from Malawi. The traveler and two other suspected cases were placed in isolation. Israel said all three were vaccinated, but officials were looking into the travelers' exact vaccination status.

After a 10-hour overnight trip, passengers aboard KLM Flight 598 from Capetown, South Africa, to Amsterdam were held on the edge of the runway Friday morning at Schiphol airport for four hours pending special testing. Passengers aboard a flight from Johannesburg were also being isolated and tested.

"It's ridiculous. If we didn't catch the dreaded bugger before, we're catching it now," said passenger Francesca de' Medici, a Rome-based art consultant who was on the flight.

Some experts said the variant's emergence illustrated how rich countries' hoarding of vaccines threatens to prolong the pandemic.



A passenger walks through International Arrivals, at London's Heathrow Airport, Friday, Nov. 26, 2021. The U.K. announced that it was banning flights from South Africa and five other southern African countries effective at noon on Friday, and that anyone who had recently arrived from those countries would be asked to take a coronavirus test. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Fewer than 6% of people in Africa have been fully immunized against COVID-19, and millions of health workers and vulnerable populations have yet to receive a single dose. Those conditions can speed up spread of the virus, offering more opportunities for it to evolve into a dangerous variant.

"This is one of the consequences of the inequity in vaccine rollouts and

why the grabbing of surplus vaccines by richer countries will inevitably rebound on us all at some point," said Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at Britain's University of Southampton. He urged Group of 20 leaders "to go beyond vague promises and actually deliver on their commitments to share doses."

The new variant added to investor anxiety that months of progress containing COVID-19 could be reversed.

"Investors are likely to shoot first and ask questions later until more is known," said Jeffrey Halley of foreign exchange broker Oanda.

In a sign of how concerned Wall Street has become, the market's so-called fear gauge known as the VIX jumped 48% to a reading of 26.91. That's the highest reading for the volatility index since January, before vaccines were widely distributed.



People wearing masks on an escalator at a shopping mall, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday Nov. 26, 2021. Advisers to the World Health Organization are holding a special session Friday to flesh out information about a worrying new variant of the coronavirus that has emerged in South Africa, though its impact on COVID-19 vaccines may not be known for weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Farrell

Speaking before the EU announcement, Dr. Michael Ryan, head of emergencies at the WHO, warned against "knee-jerk responses."

"We've seen in the past, the minute there's any kind of mention of any kind of variation and everyone is closing borders and restricting travel," Ryan said. "It's really important that we remain open and stay focused."

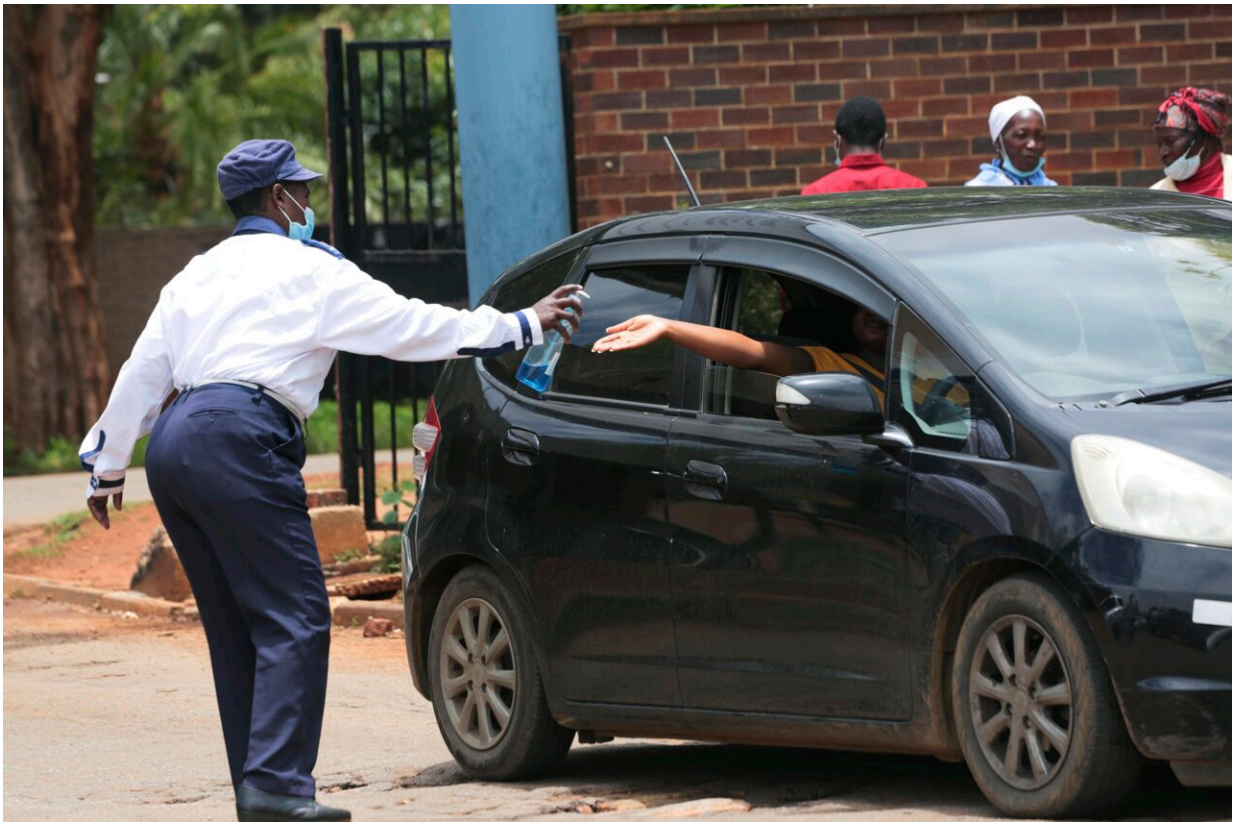
The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed and strongly discouraged any travel bans on countries that reported the new variant. It said past experience shows that such travel bans have "not yielded a meaningful outcome."

Yet the U.S. announced restrictions on visitors from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, and Malawi, hours after governments took similar steps.

The U.K. banned flights from South Africa and five other southern African countries at noon on Friday and announced that anyone who had recently arrived from those countries would be asked to take a coronavirus test.



A mother takes time to rest with her children in Harare, Zimbabwe, Friday, Nov, 26, 2021. A slew of nations have moved to stop air travel from southern Africa, and stocks have plunged in Asia and Europe in reaction to news of a new, potentially more transmissible COVID-19 variant. Credit: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi



A security guard sanitizes a motorist's hands, at the entrance of a health facility in Harare, Zimbabwe, Friday, Nov, 26, 2021. A slew of nations have moved to stop air travel from southern Africa, and stocks have plunged in Asia and Europe in reaction to news of a new, potentially more transmissible COVID-19 variant. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi) /

The Japanese government announced that Japanese nationals traveling from Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa and Lesotho will have to quarantine at government-dedicated accommodations for 10 days and take COVID-19 tests on the third, sixth and tenth days. Japan has not yet opened up to foreign nationals.

Fauci said U.S. public health officials were talking Friday with South African colleagues. "We want to find out scientist to scientist exactly what is going on."

The WHO's technical working group says coronavirus infections jumped 11% in the past week in Europe, the only region in the world where COVID-19 continues to rise.

The WHO's Europe director, Dr. Hans Kluge, warned that without urgent measures, the continent could see an additional 700,000 deaths by the spring.

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Citation: New omicron variant stokes world fears, triggers travel bans (2021, November 26) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-11-virus-variant-emerges-africa-stokes.html>

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