

# WHO, US scientists say Omicron no worse than other virus variants

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The Omicron variant appears to be no worse than other coronavirus strains, top scientists from the WHO and the United States told AFP,

while cautioning that more research is needed to judge its severity.

The hopeful assessments came as global concern grew over the heavily mutated variant, which has forced dozens of nations to re-impose border restrictions and raised the possibility of a return to economically punishing lockdowns.

While it is likely more transmissible than previous variants, "the preliminary data don't indicate that this is more severe," the World Health Organization's second-in-command told AFP.

"In fact, if anything, the direction is towards less severity," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said in an interview on Tuesday, insisting though that more research was needed.

Ryan also said it was "highly unlikely" that Omicron could fully sidestep protections provided by existing COVID vaccines.

"We have highly effective vaccines that have proved effective against all the variants so far, in terms of severe disease and hospitalisation... There's no reason to expect that it wouldn't be so" for Omicron, he added, pointing to initial data from South Africa, where the strain was first reported.

However, Ryan acknowledged that it was possible that existing vaccines might prove less effective against Omicron, which counts more than 30 mutations on the spike protein that dots the surface of the coronavirus and allows it to invade cells.

Top US scientist Anthony Fauci echoed the WHO's view, saying Omicron did not appear worse than prior strains based on early indications—and was possibly milder.



Omicron has so far been found in 57 countries around the world, the WHO says, but no deaths have yet been associated with the variant.

The new variant is "clearly highly transmissible," very likely more so than Delta, the current dominant global strain, Fauci told AFP.

"It almost certainly is not more severe than Delta," he said. "There is some suggestion that it might even be less severe."

But he noted it was important to not over-interpret the data because the populations being followed skewed young and were less likely to become hospitalised. Severe disease can also take weeks to develop.

"Then, as we get more infections throughout the rest of the world, it might take longer to see what's the level of severity."

## Global concern

The detection of the first Omicron cases two weeks ago coincided with surges in infection numbers across the world, and the variant added fuel to concerns about a global COVID resurgence.

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Ryan stressed the need for all countries to help detect Omicron cases and research its behaviour.



Scientists believe it unlikely that Omicron could fully sidestep protections provided by existing Covid vaccines.

"The more and better data we collect in the next two weeks, (the better chances) of a clear conclusion regarding the implications of this variant," he said.

As European Union health ministers met Tuesday to find ways to coordinate their response, Norway announced it will tighten restrictions to combat its surge.

A suspected outbreak of Omicron last week among dozens of partygoers who had all been vaccinated led to new restrictions in and around the capital Oslo.

Neighbouring Sweden also said Tuesday it would launch a series of anti-COVID measures.

Elsewhere in Europe, Poland said that from December 15, it will restrict the number of people allowed in churches, restaurants and theatres, and make vaccination compulsory for healthcare workers, teachers and the military from March 1.

## **Growing frustration**

While the positive initial assessments of Omicron helped lift the mood, especially among global markets as fears of another economic downturn subsided, the variant's emergence has highlighted that the fight against the pandemic is far from over.



COVID-19 has officially killed more than 5.2 million people around the world since it was first declared in late 2019, although the true toll is likely to be several times higher.

## Covid-19

World toll Tuesday, December 7 at 1100 GMT

Deaths	New	Cases	New
5,261,473	6,112	265,805,289	546,515

New: 24-hour increase on Monday, December 6

### Hardest-hit countries

	Deaths	New (latest report)	Cases
UNITED STATES	789,745	1,345	49,278,724
BRAZIL	615,744	108	22,147,476
INDIA*	473,757	220	34,648,383
MEXICO	295,313	110	3,902,015
RUSSIA	283,644	1,182	9,864,845
PERU	201,421	42	2,245,146
UNITED KINGDOM	145,646	41	10,515,239
INDONESIA	143,876	9	4,257,815
ITALY	134,287	92	5,118,576
IRAN	130,356	79	6,141,335
COLOMBIA	128,821	41	5,082,762
FRANCE**	119,535	-	7,917,264

\*Revised tolls

\*\*No toll reported Monday

Increases over 24 hours may not tally exactly with previous day's total, due to inavailability or late publication of data or corrections made by authorities

Sources: AFP count based on official tolls

Toll of coronavirus infections and deaths worldwide and in worst-affected countries based on AFP tallies, as of December 7 at 1100 GMT.

Scientists and health experts say vaccinations and continued social distancing remain key to defeating all variants of the virus, including Omicron.

"The virus hasn't changed its nature," Ryan said. "The rules of the game are still the same."

But vaccine requirements have sparked resistance in many countries, either because of misinformation and conspiracy theories or the economic and logistical impact of such mandates.

Around 4,000 people protested in Brussels on Tuesday against a plan by the Belgian government to make vaccines compulsory for health workers from early next year.

"We are in favour of vaccination, but why only health workers?" said nurse Perrine.

"Because everyone must be vaccinated, it is everyone or no one."

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