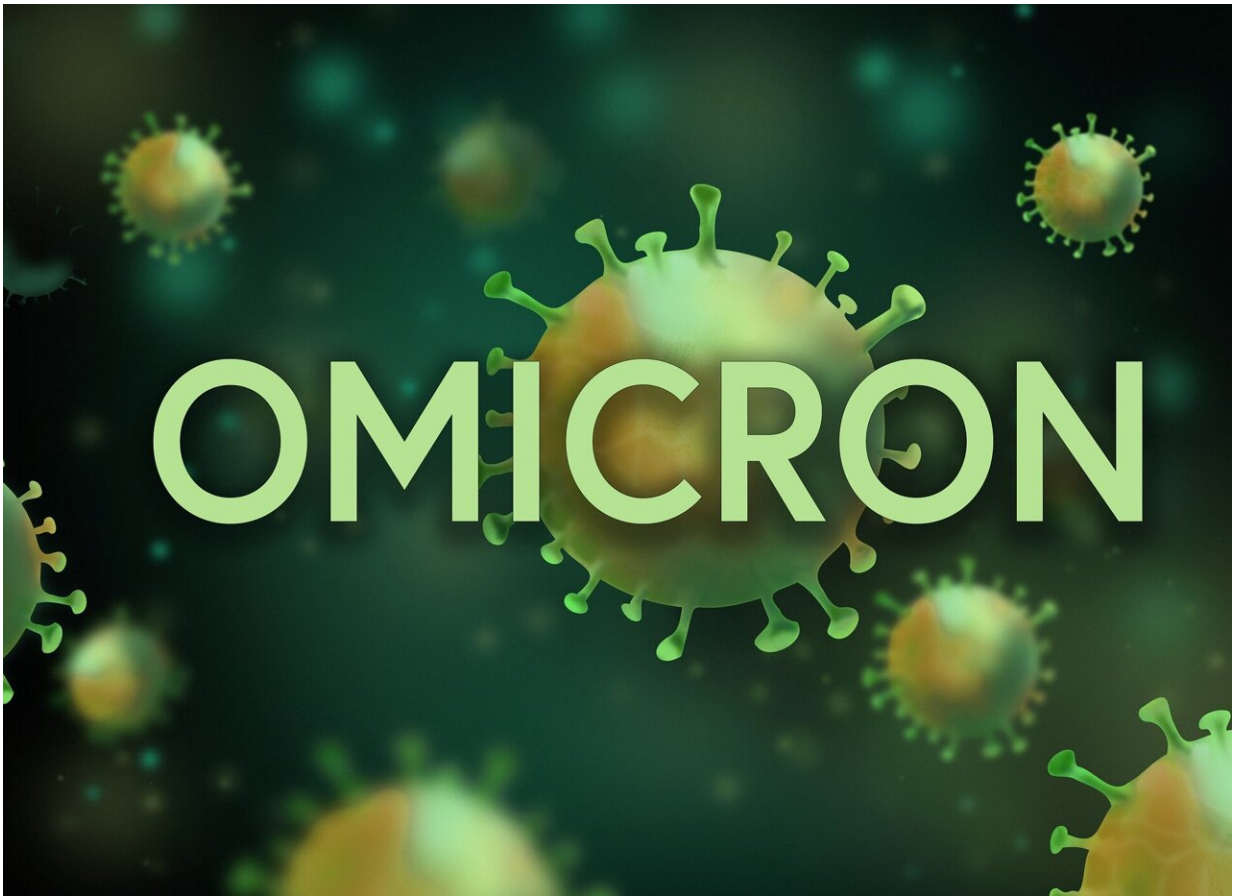


Soaring Omicron could lead to more dangerous variants, WHO warns

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Soaring Omicron cases around the globe could increase the risk of a newer, more dangerous variant emerging, the World Health Organization

in Europe warned on Tuesday.

While the [variant](#) is spreading like wildfire around the world, it appears to be far less severe than initially feared and has raised hopes that the pandemic could be overcome and life return to more normality.

But WHO senior emergencies officer Catherine Smallwood sounded an ominous note of caution, telling AFP that the soaring infection rates could have the opposite effect.

"The more Omicron spreads, the more it transmits and the more it replicates, the more likely it is to throw out a new variant. Now, Omicron is lethal, it can cause death ... maybe a little bit less than Delta, but who's to say what the next variant might throw out," Smallwood told AFP in an interview.

Europe has registered more than 100 million COVID cases since the start of the pandemic, and more than five million new cases in the last week of 2021, "almost dwarfing what we have seen in the past", Smallwood said.

"We're in a very dangerous phase, we're seeing infection rates rise very significantly in Western Europe, and the full impact of that is not yet clear," she said.

Smallwood also noted that while "on an individual level there's probably a decreased risk of hospitalisation" with the Omicron variant compared to Delta, overall, Omicron could pose a greater threat because of the sheer number of cases.

"When you see the cases rise so significantly, that's likely to generate a lot more people with [severe disease](#), ending up in hospital and possibly going on to die," she said.

Britain on Tuesday faced warnings of an impending hospital crisis due to staff shortages caused by a wave of Omicron infections, as the country's daily COVID caseload breached 200,000 for the first time.

Smallwood said she expected that scenario to play out in other European countries as well.

"Even in well-capacitated, sophisticated [health systems](#) there are real struggles that are happening at the moment, and it's likely that these will play out across the region as Omicron drives cases upwards."

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