

'Stealth' version of Omicron variant no cause for alarm, experts say

January 31 2022



(HealthDay)—The so-called "stealth" variant of Omicron isn't likely to

cause another devastating wave of COVID-19, experts say.

The new version of the [variant](#), called [BA.2](#), doesn't appear to cause more [severe disease](#) and vaccines are just as effective against it as against the original [Omicron variant](#) (BA.1), but BA.2 does show signs of spreading more rapidly.

"This may mean higher peak infections in places that have yet to peak, and a slowdown in the downward trends in places that have already experienced peak Omicron," Thomas Peacock, a virologist at Imperial College London, told *The New York Times*.

Back in December, South African researchers discovered that a growing number of PCR tests were failing to detect the spike gene—a sign that BA.1 was becoming dominant.

Unlike BA.1., BA.2 lacks a key spike mutation. That can cause a PCR COVID detection test to fail. Without the ability to use PCR tests to track BA.2, some scientists nicknamed it the "stealth" version of Omicron, the *Times* reported.

But BA.2 wasn't invisible: Researchers could still spot it by analyzing the genetic sequences of samples from positive tests. And once Delta disappeared, scientists could use PCR tests to tell the difference between BA.1 and BA.2: Samples that caused spike failures contained BA.1, while the ones that didn't contained BA.2.

In recent weeks, BA.2 has become more common. In Denmark, the variant accounts for up to 65% of new cases, officials said late last week. But it doesn't appear to be more dangerous: Danish researchers found that people with BA.2 and BA.1 have similar hospitalization rates, the *Times* reported.

An [early analysis](#) of BA.2 released Friday by the British government showed that BA.2 accounts for fewer cases there, but is growing faster than BA.1 across England, the *Times* reported.

However, British researchers have concluded that vaccines are as effective against BA.2 as they are BA.1.

About 8% of cases in the United States are [BA.2](#), and that percentage is rising quickly, according to Trevor Bedford, a virologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle.

"I'm fairly certain that it will become dominant in the U.S., but I don't yet know what that would mean for the pandemic," Nathan Grubaugh, an epidemiologist at the Yale University School of Public Health, told the *Times*.

BA.2 could lead to a new surge, but it's more likely that COVID-19 cases will continue to fall in weeks to come, Grubaugh added.

There's also a chance that the new Omicron variant may create a small increase in cases as they decline overall, or slow the decrease. Current experiments on BA.1 may help scientists improve their projections, according to the *Times*.

More information: Visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for more on the [Omicron variant](#).

Copyright © 2021 [HealthDay](#). All rights reserved.

Citation: 'Stealth' version of Omicron variant no cause for alarm, experts say (2022, January 31)

retrieved 7 August 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-stealth-version-omicron-variant-alarm.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.