

COVID-19 variant JN.1 is on the rise. Here's what you need to know

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A new COVID-19 variant is now estimated to make up about 20% of COVID-19 cases in the United States.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently named the strain, JN.1, a variant of concern—meaning that the global body is monitoring the variant closely but hasn't yet added it to its "watchlist" of high-risk strains. Still, the WHO warns the fast-spreading variant could lead to an uptick in cases during winter months as people spend more time indoors at family and group gatherings.

In California, the proportion of people testing positive for COVID-19 has been on a steady rise since November, coinciding with flu season.

We recently spoke with three UC San Francisco COVID-19 experts, Vivek Jain, MD, MAS; George Rutherford, MD, and Peter Chin-Hong, MD, to get the rundown on this COVID-19 season and the latest variant.

What are the symptoms of the new JN.1 COVID-19 variant?

Chin-Hong: The symptoms of JN.1 are thought to be similar those of other members of the omicron family of COVID-19 variants: Typically, illness starts with a [sore throat](#), followed by congestion and a dry cough.

People may also experience other symptoms such as a [runny nose](#), fatigue, headache, muscle aches, fever, diarrhea and an altered sense of smell. But probably what is more important than the symptoms is who has it: A patient who is older than 75 or is immunocompromised and who has not been recently vaccinated against COVID-19 may experience more serious symptoms like difficulty breathing. Folks like these can get very ill.

How worried should we be about the new variant?

Chin-Hong: There is no evidence that the new [variant](#) causes more

serious disease, hospitalizations or a higher fatality rate than other omicron variants.

Will COVID-19 vaccines work against the new variant?

Chin-Hong: Yes. Although the [vaccine](#) was developed against another omicron strain (XBB.1.5), studies have shown that the new COVID-19 vaccine generates a robust immune response to JN.1. I have full confidence in the new formulation of the COVID-19 vaccine for the variants that are circulating right now.

Will current COVID-19 treatments work against the new JN.1 strain?

Chin-Hong: Yes, the current slate of COVID-19 antivirals such as Paxlovid and—for hospitalized COVID-19 patients, remdesivir—are also very effective against JN.1. Remember, it's important to take Paxlovid as soon as possible after showing symptoms of COVID-19, ideally within the first five days. You'll need a prescription for both these medications.

Who should get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Jain: Broadly, everyone six months and older should get the new 2023–2024 COVID-19 vaccine. COVID-19 vaccines are very safe and lower peoples' risk of death and hospitalization, especially those who are older or who have medical conditions.

Can I get my flu and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time?

Jain: Yes, if that's convenient. It's also okay to space them slightly apart.

If you're 60 and over or in weeks 32 to 36 of pregnancy, you may also qualify for the new RSV vaccines.

How often should people be vaccinated against COVID-19?

Jain: Everyone should strongly consider staying up to date with annual COVID-19 vaccines. People should talk with their [health care providers](#) and consider factors like age, and [medical conditions](#), including whether they are immunosuppressed, live with other people at high risk for serious COVID-19 and their COVID-19 history.

Do kids really need the COVID-19 vaccine?

Rutherford: Yes. COVID-19 was the eighth leading cause of death in the U.S. between 2021 and 2022. It's the number one vaccine-preventable cause of death among children in the U.S.

Can I still get a COVID-19 vaccine for free?

Jain: Yes, [health insurance](#) and pharmacies will cover the cost of the new COVID-19 vaccines. People without insurance or who might face a difficult co-payment should contact their local health department for places to get free COVID-19 vaccinations. You can also check the federal government's Bridge Access Program for [free COVID-19 vaccines](#) at thousands of locations nationwide.

Provided by University of California, San Francisco

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