



Health Alert Network Message 21-80: WHO Classifies the COVID-19 Omicron Variant

Origination Date:
November 29, 2021

Revision Dates (List All Revision Dates):

LA HAN Alert:

- New Omicron variant not yet identified in Louisiana, LDH continues to monitor situation
- Providers should perform a PCR test on all international travelers

On November 26, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified a new variant, B.1.1.529, as a Variant of Concern and has named it Omicron. This new variant was first reported to the WHO by government officials in South Africa, and the number of cases of this variant appears to be increasing throughout the Republic of South Africa. To date, no cases of Omicron have been identified in Louisiana or the United States. However, cases have been identified in at least 15 countries as of 10:22 a.m. on November 28, 2021.

New information is still emerging, but Omicron includes multiple mutations across the SARS-CoV-2 genome, some of which may have concerning public health implications. There is concern this new variant may be more transmissible than previous strains and that Omicron may carry an increased risk of re-infection, compared to other variants of concern. We expect to learn more about Omicron in the coming days.

LDH has established a network of laboratories to conduct genomic sequencing on a sample of positive SARS-CoV-2 specimens in order to track circulating SARS-CoV-2 lineages, including newly emerging variants such as Omicron. Epidemiologists, laboratorians, and researchers will continue to closely monitor these data in order to identify Omicron cases in Louisiana.

In addition, it appears that for one widely used PCR test platform (ThermoFisher TaqPath), one of the three target genes is not detected (called S gene dropout or S gene target failure). As a result, this test can be used as marker for this variant, pending sequencing confirmation. In order to rapidly detect Omicron cases, LDH is asking health care providers to assist in the following ways:

- **Health care providers should perform a PCR test on all travelers returning from Southern Africa** (specifically Republic of Botswana, the Kingdom of Eswatini, the Kingdom of Lesotho, the Republic of Malawi, the Republic of Mozambique, the Republic of Namibia, the Republic of South Africa, and the Republic of Zimbabwe) immediately after their return and, if negative, 3-5 days later. For facilities that do not have access to the platform which detects the S gene dropout (namely the ThermoFisher TaqPath), the Infectious Disease Epidemiology Section (IDEpi) of the Office of Public Health requests that a second specimen be collected for testing at the state laboratory. Please call the IDEpi clinicians' hotline at 800-256-2748 to assist with specimen submission.
- **Healthcare providers should perform a PCR test on all travelers returning from all other international destinations**, regardless of symptoms, vaccination status or recent history of COVID-19 infection, 3-5 days after their return to the US.
- **Laboratories with the ability to detect S gene target failures (namely the ThermoFisher TaqPath) should immediately report** these cases, regardless of travel history, to the IDEpi clinicians' hotline at 800-256-2748.