

IMMUNIZATION COVID-19 UPDATE

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QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Has the Omicron variant been identified in Louisiana?

No. The new Omicron variant has not yet been identified in Louisiana but it has been identified in California on Wednesday, December 1, from a traveler recently returning from South Africa and in Minnesota on Thursday, December 2, from a traveler recently returning from New York. Cases have also been identified in at least 24 countries as of early December. The Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) is conducting tests on samples of positive COVID-19 test results and monitoring labs to know if and when the variant is detected in Louisiana.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has classified Omicron as a “variant of concern,” saying it may spread more quickly than other forms of coronavirus and is suspected of driving a spike in new infections in South Africa.

Experts say it could be several more weeks before the types of disease caused by the variant can be determined, as well as how contagious it is and how far it has already spread.

For more information on COVID-19 variants, visit [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov).

COMPLETED
VACCINE SERIES
IN LOUISIANA

2,270,801*

*4,678,200 total doses
administered in Louisiana

NEWOMICRON
VARIANT NOT YET
IDENTIFIED IN
LOUISIANA

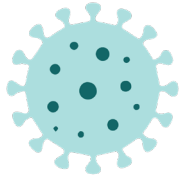
LDH has established a network of laboratories to continue testing to closely monitor for Omicron cases in Louisiana. (Page 2)

CURRENT
KNOWLEDGE ABOUT
OMICRON

An overview of all the information we know about the Omicron variant by the World Health Organization (WHO). (Pages 2-3)

WEEKLY COVID-19 VACCINE UPDATE

New Omicron Variant Not Yet Identified in Louisiana, LDH Continues to Monitor Situation



On November 26, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified a new variant, B.1.1.529, as a Variant of Concern and 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. On Wednesday, December 1, the first case of the Omicron variant was detected in California by an infected traveler returning from South Africa. Another case has been reported from Minnesota on Thursday, December 2, from a traveler returning from New York. Cases have also been identified in at least 24 countries as of Wednesday, December 1, 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. In the coming days, all can expect to learn more about Omicron.

The Louisiana Department of Health (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 this data in order to identify Omicron cases in Louisiana.

In addition, it appears that one widely used PCR test platform (ThermoFisher TaqPath), is not detecting one of the three target genes (S gene dropout or S gene target failure). As a result, this test can be used as a 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** immediately after their return and, if negative, again 3-5 days later.
 - For facilities that do not have access to the platform which detects the S gene drop out (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. 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 U.S.
- **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.

"The time to prepare is now," said State Health Officer Dr. Joseph Kanter. "The best way to prepare and prevent a future COVID surge is for everyone 5 years of age and older to get vaccinated and for everyone 18 years of age and older to get a booster. If you are eligible and have not yet joined the more than 2.5 million Louisianians who have done so already, go get the COVID vaccine today.

"Now that we are entering the winter holiday season, it's also more important than ever to use those public health tools we know work – mask according to applicable guidelines, practice good hand hygiene, and get tested and stay home if you are sick," said Dr. Kanter.

Everyone aged 5 and older is eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine in Louisiana. The vaccines are widely available at more than 1,000 locations in all of Louisiana's 64 parishes, including at pharmacies, hospitals, healthcare clinics, and doctor's offices.

Current Knowledge about Omicron

Transmissibility: It is not yet clear whether Omicron is more transmissible compared to other variants, including Delta. The number of people testing positive has risen in areas of South Africa affected by this variant, but epidemiologic studies are underway to understand if it is because of Omicron or other factors.

Severity of Disease: It is not yet clear whether infection with Omicron causes more severe disease compared to infections with other variants, including Delta. Preliminary data suggests that there are increasing rates of hospitalization in South Africa, but this may be due to increasing overall numbers of people becoming infected, rather than a result of specific infection with Omicron. There is currently no information to suggest that symptoms associated with Omicron are different from those of other variants.

Effectiveness of Prior SARS-CoV-2 Infection: Preliminary evidence suggests there may be an increased risk of reinfection with Omicron (i.e., people who have previously had COVID-19 could become reinfected more easily with Omicron), as compared to other variants of concern, but information is limited.

Continued on page 3

Effectiveness of Vaccines: The World Health Organization (WHO) is working with technical partners to understand the potential impact of this variant on our existing countermeasures, including vaccines. Vaccines remain critical to reducing severe disease and death, including against the dominant circulating variant, Delta. Current vaccines remain effective against severe disease and death.

Effectiveness of Current Tests: The widely used PCR tests continue to detect infection, including infection with Omicron, as we have seen with other variants as well. Studies are ongoing to determine whether there is any impact on other types of tests, including rapid antigen detection tests.

Effectiveness of Current Treatments: Corticosteroids and IL6 Receptor Blockers will still be effective for managing patients with severe COVID-19. Other treatments will be assessed to see if they are still as effective given the changes to parts of the virus in the Omicron variant.

For more information on the Omicron variant, visit [who.int](https://www.who.int).

Myths and Facts about COVID-19 Vaccines

How do I know which COVID-19 vaccine information sources are accurate?

Accurate vaccine information is critical and can help stop common myths and rumors.

It can be difficult to know which sources of information you can trust. Before considering vaccine information on the Internet, check that the information comes from a credible source and is updated on a regular basis. Sources such as CDC, World Health Organization, Johns Hopkins, the Cleveland Clinic, and state health agencies are all good sources of factual information.

Can COVID-19 vaccines cause variants?

No. COVID-19 vaccines do not create or cause variants of the virus that causes COVID-19.

New variants of a virus happen because the virus that causes COVID-19 constantly changes through a natural ongoing process of mutation (change). Even before the COVID-19 vaccines, there were several variants of the virus. Looking ahead, variants are expected to continue to emerge as the virus continues to change.

COVID-19 vaccines can help prevent new variants from emerging. As it spreads, the virus has more opportunities to change. High vaccination coverage in a population reduces the spread of the virus and helps prevent new variants from emerging. CDC recommends that everyone 5 years and older gets vaccinated as soon as possible.

LOUISIANA COVID-19 VACCINE DEMOGRAPHICS

SERIES COMPLETED BY RACE:

- **White:** 58.45%
- **Black:** 30.71%
- **American Indian:** 0.39%
- **Asian:** 2.78%
- **Native Hawaiian:** 0.19%
- **Unknown:** 1.31%
- **Other:** 6.17%

SERIES COMPLETED BY AGE:

- **5-17:** 5.49%
- **18-29:** 12.97%
- **30-39:** 13.4%
- **40-49:** 13.91%
- **50-59:** 16.75%
- **60-69:** 18.68%
- **70+:** 18.64%

SERIES COMPLETED BY GENDER:

- **Female:** 54.15%
- **Male:** 45.58%
- **Unknown:** 0.26%

All breakdowns shown here are for Louisiana residents only. Race data completeness is expected to improve as we continue our outreach with vaccine providers.

Good Reads

Get vaccinated: New study links COVID-19 to stillbirths – This article talks about how CDC research shows women delivering in a hospital with COVID-19 were four times more likely to have a stillbirth.

Read more at wdsu.com.

Biden administration expected to toughen testing requirements for travelers – This article talks about how the Biden administration is expected to take steps in the coming days to toughen testing requirements for international travelers to the U.S., both vaccinated and unvaccinated.

Read more at wdsu.com.

Last year's word of the year was pandemic. Here's what Merriam-Webster chose for 2021. – This article talks about how Merriam-Webster has declared "vaccine" as the word of the year for 2021.

Read more at nola.com.