
PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT

OMICRON VARIANT (B.1.1.529)

DECEMBER 2, 2021

The Riverside University Health System - Public Health (RUHS - PH) provides this guidance based on current information. Updated guidance will be issued as new information becomes available.

Situation

The World Health Organization has designated the B.1.1.529 as a variant of concern (VOC). California health officials reported the first case in the state from a traveler who had returned to San Francisco from South Africa late last month. The patient had what was described as mild symptoms. No cases have been identified in Riverside County at this time. New Variants will continue to evolve as long as there are large proportions of unvaccinated people. Although the Omicron variant was first detected by South Africa, cases have been found in multiple countries.

This new variant has many mutations in important areas of the virus that impact infectiousness and the ability for immune systems to protect from infection. Some of the mutations are concerning because they are very different from other variants previously detected. It is not known at this time if this new variant causes more severe COVID-19 illness than other variants or how it might impact response to treatment. Additional information on the Omicron variant is located at [https://www.who.int/news/item/26-11-2021-classification-of-omicron-\(b.1.1.529\)-sars-cov-2-variant-of-concern](https://www.who.int/news/item/26-11-2021-classification-of-omicron-(b.1.1.529)-sars-cov-2-variant-of-concern).

Background

The B.1.1.529 variant was first reported to WHO from South Africa on November 24, 2021. The epidemiological situation in South Africa has been characterized by three distinct peaks in reported cases, the latest of which was predominantly the Delta variant. In recent weeks, infections have increased steeply, coinciding with the detection of B.1.1.529 variant. The first known confirmed B.1.1.529 infection was from a specimen collected on November 9, 2021. This variant has a large

number of mutations, some of which are concerning. Preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection with this variant, as compared to other VOCs. The number of cases of this variant appears to be increasing in almost all provinces in South Africa. Initial reported infections were among university students—younger individuals who tend to have more mild disease—but understanding the level of severity of the Omicron variant will take days to several weeks. Current SARS-CoV-2 PCR diagnostics continue to detect this variant. The California Department of Public Health issued a Health Alert on November 29, 2021. The Health Alert is attached for your reference.

Action Requested of Clinicians

- Encourage all eligible patients, including all people age 5 and older, to be vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccine including booster doses for all adults 18 and older when indicated.
- Offer influenza vaccine to patients 6 months and older.
- Report suspect Omicron variant cases to Riverside County Disease Control at 951-358-5107.
- Obtain a more in-depth travel history for patients with recent travel to countries where the Omicron variant has been identified. See link below for impacted countries:
<https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#global-variant-report-map>
- Collect and submit specimens for whole genome sequencing (WGS) from patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection who meet at least one of the following criteria:
 - Recent international travel especially to those countries in which the Omicron variant has been detected.
 - Exposure to persons with recent international travel especially to countries in which the Omicron variant has been detected
 - Possible re-infection (i.e., recurrence of symptoms with positive molecular testing at least 90 days after initial infection)
 - Infection >14 days after completing a vaccination series (i.e., two doses of a mRNA Pfizer or Moderna vaccines or one dose of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine.
 - Part of a cluster or outbreak
 - Atypical symptoms

Therapeutics

Corticosteroids and IL6 Receptor Blockers will still be effective for managing patients with severe COVID-19. Other treatments, including monoclonal antibody therapy, will be assessed to see if they are still as effective given the changes to parts of the virus in the Omicron variant. Continue to refer patients who meet the eligibility criteria for monoclonal antibody therapy. Resources and information on the availability of monoclonal antibody therapy in Riverside County are available on the RUHS-PH website (<https://www.rivcoph.org/coronavirus>).

Specimen submission for WGS

- Specimen type and source – upper and lower respiratory specimens (Nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal swabs collected with a synthetic tip and an aluminum or plastic shaft. Sputum, lower respiratory tract aspirates, broncho-alveolar lavage, and nasopharyngeal wash/aspirate or nasal aspirate collected in a sterile container).
- Swab specimen should be transported in 1-3mL of VTM or sterile saline.
- Store specimen at 2-8°C and transport to Public Health Lab on cold pack within 72 hours of collection.
- If there is a delay in transport, freeze samples at -70°C and transport on dry ice.
- If Nucleic Acid Extract is available, please submit at least 50µL and ship with cold pack or dry ice.
- Please see the CDC and WHO guidelines for additional information:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/lab/guidelines-clinical-specimens.html>

Contact the Riverside County lab at 951-358-5070 if you have any questions on specimen submittal.

Disease Reporting

- Health Care providers should report COVID-19 cases to Riverside County Disease Control at (951) 358-5107 or report through CalREDIE, if enrolled.
- Laboratories should report specimens that are positive for SARS-CoV-2 through the CalREDIE Electronic Lab Reporting (ELR) portal.

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