



With CT COVID cases rising, latest variant concerns experts

[Peter Yankowski](#)

Nov. 26, 2021 Updated: Nov. 27, 2021 12:07 p.m.

As COVID cases continue to mount in Connecticut, President Joe Biden on Friday announced plans to restrict travel to the U.S. from South Africa and seven other nations starting on Monday, amid heightened concerns over a new strain of the coronavirus.

The administration plans to restrict travel from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi, [CNN reported](#).

“As we move forward, we will continue to be guided by what the science and my medical team advises,” Biden said in a tweet. “For now the best way to strengthen your protection if you’re already vaccinated is to get a booster shot, immediately. For those not yet fully vaccinated: get vaccinated today.”

The president also called for other nations to help in vaccinating the rest of the world. “It is time for other countries to match America’s speed and generosity,” the president said in a statement.

In New York, Governor Kathy Hochul signed an [executive order](#) that would allow public health officials to limit non-essential medical procedures in anticipation of a possible surge.

“We've taken extraordinary action to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and combat this pandemic. However, we continue to see warning signs of spikes this upcoming winter, and while the new Omicron variant has yet to be detected in New York State, it's coming,” Hochul said in a statement.

The World Health Organization on Friday classified the strain, known by the scientific name B.1.1.529, as a “variant of concern” alongside the widespread delta variant and three other strains. The WHO named the new strain “Omicron,” in keeping with its Greek alphabet naming convention.

The strain has so far not appeared in Connecticut, according to the latest report to the state Department of Public Health. That data, published Wednesday, showed all cases tested through genetic sequencing the past week were delta.

The organization said the variant shows a large number of mutations and may pose a greater risk of reinfection from the virus compared to other variants of concern.

The news comes as cases and hospitalizations are on the rise in Connecticut, leading many local public health experts to raise concerns about family gatherings over the holidays, even as many celebrated a more traditional Thanksgiving on Thursday. The state is now recording more than 750 new cases each day on average, public health data shows, and new hospital admissions are also on the rise after the surge fueled by the delta variant in the late summer.

“The irony of this is that there is a variant that we should all really be worried about at this point, which is the delta [variant],” said Dr. Ulysses Wu, chief epidemiologist at Hartford HealthCare. “Unfortunately not everybody has taken that one seriously.”

He said for Connecticut residents the key takeaway should not be to sow fear or panic, but continue with public health measures like masking and getting vaccinated. “If you’re not boosted or vaccinated, please get vaccinated, get boosted,” he said. He also advocated for people to wear masks indoors. “The reality of this is we will continue to create variants until we get enough people vaccinated— not just in Connecticut or the U.S. but the world,” he added.

Connecticut recorded 1,900 new infections over the last two days, according to state figures released Friday (reporting was paused over the Thanksgiving holiday Thursday), with 3.61 positivity rate out of 52,595 tests. Hospitalizations for the virus remained flat with 300 patients currently admitted.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention so far has not named the new strain a variant of concern.

Very little is known so far about the variant, said Nathan Grubaugh, head of the Yale School of Public Health's variant surveillance project, but in some provinces of South Africa it now makes up to 90 percent of cases. "The concern here is that it's growing faster than delta, and therefore could be more transmissible than delta," Grubaugh said Friday.

The strain also features "several different mutations to its spike protein," he said, some of which are important to the body's immune response to the virus either from antibody treatments, or from the vaccines.

Besides genomic sequencing, where researchers study the virus found in positive test kits to see what variants and lineages of the virus are circulating, Grubaugh said the new variant can also be detected through a particular PCR test for COVID-19. People who test for the virus will still receive an accurate positive or negative test result, but public health officials can use the data to get a sense if the variant is circulating faster than they would be able to through genomic sequencing.

"I think the message is that... we have a very robust surveillance system in Connecticut and in our region through both sequencing and the PCR testing to detect it early," Grubaugh said. But once it does show up in the region, he said vaccines will still be "our most powerful tool" to prevent its spread.

Statewide a little less than 76 percent of those eligible to receive a vaccine - those over the age of 5 - are fully vaccinated, according to CDC data. A little over 21 percent of those who are fully-vaccinated have received a booster shot or additional dose of the vaccine (the CDC data groups both additional shots together).

It's also unknown how well the variant will compete with delta in the U.S. and in Europe, both of which have seen a resurgence in infections, Grubaugh said. He noted the U.S. also has a higher vaccination rate than much of Africa. While he said the Biden administration's plan to restrict travel might buy some time, it won't prevent the variant from spreading.

But, "I am concerned because this is the worst time to have a new, potentially more transmissible variant to be introduced with the holidays, the family gatherings— it could provide the right environment it needs to take off," he added.

Wu, the Hartford HealthCare epidemiologist, expressed a similar attitude. "The reality is we're witnessing Darwinism at it's finest," he said, pointing to how delta surpassed other major variants of the virus to become predominant. "We need to see if [Omicron] will become the proverbial Hulk Hogan of variants."