COVID-19: ASK DR. BEN

Special edition - AFRICA REGION – 29 November 2021

Dr. Ben is Head of Health and Care with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). In this **special edition**, we have gathered key questions and answers related to the new COVID-19 variant named **Omicron** (B.1.1.529). We recognise that due to the likely new evidence that will emerge in the coming days and weeks, the information gathered here reflects the best knowledge we have to date and will be updated as scientific progress advances. This fact sheet aims to help African National Societies and partners working on Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) & Health activities in the Africa region to respond to common questions and provide the facts behind the rumours and misinformation about the coronavirus.

1. What is a variant and why does it appear?

First, we need to understand that viruses are constantly changing over time, this is a very normal process in a virus's life. As long as the virus continues to spread, variants are likely to appear. To survive, viruses need to find living thing for them to stay in (e.g. animals or humans), as if they were entering a new home. The COVID-19 virus makes the human body its home. When they find that new home, they start making copies of themselves to multiply. However, in the process of multiplying itself, the virus is not always able to make identical copies. This is known as a mutation. When a mutation can replicate at a significant level, it becomes a variant.

2. How many COVID-19 variants do we have so far?

In total, 15 variants have been detected and listed by the WHO. The main ones considered as of concern are Alpha (the original), Beta, Gamma and Delta. The most recent variant of concern is **Omicron.**

3. What is Omicron?

The official name of the new variant is B.1.1.529. But like the other strains (Alpha, Beta, Gamma or Delta), it was soon named after a letter of the Greek alphabet, thus becoming known worldwide as the **Omicron variant.** On 26 November 2021, it was classified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as "of concern" as it has a large number of mutations, and needs further study.

4. Where has Omicron been detected so far?

As of 28 November 2021, confirmed cases of Omicron in the African region have been detected in South Africa (110) and Botswana (19). In Europe, the confirmed cases are in the Netherlands (13), the United Kingdom (3), Denmark (2), Germany (1), Belgium (1), Italy (1), Austria (1) and the Czech Republic (1). In addition, Australia (3), Canada (2), Israel (1) and Hong Kong (1) have reported cases of the new variant in other regions. It is very likely that this list of countries will increase in the coming days.

5. Is Omicron more transmissible?

According to the WHO bulletin on 28 November, it is not yet clear whether Omicron is more transmissible compared to other variants. The number of people testing positive has risen

COVID-19: ASK DR. BEN

Special edition - AFRICA REGION – 29 November 2021

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.

6. Is Omicron more severe?

According to the WHO update on 28 November, it is not yet clear whether infection with Omicron causes more severe disease compared to infections with other variants, including Delta. Scientists will still need more information before we have a clear answer as to how severe Omicron is. So far, there is currently no information to suggest that symptoms associated with Omicron are different from those from other variants. Initial reported infections were among university students—younger individuals who tend to have more mild disease—but understanding if the Omicron variant behaves differently will take several weeks.

7. I already had COVID-19, can I get it again with Omicron?

According to the WHO update on 28 November, preliminary evidence suggests there may be an increased risk of reinfection with Omicron (i.e., people who have previously had COVID-19 could become more easily reinfected with Omicron, as compared to other variants of concern), but information is limited so far. What we do know is that you can be infected with COVID-19 more than once **regardless of the variant type**. Therefore, even after being infected, you should observe the preventive measures.

8. Are the COVID-19 vaccines effective with Omicron?

WHO is working with technical partners to understand the potential impact of this variant on our existing countermeasures, including vaccines. The current available COVID-19 vaccines **remain critical** to reducing severe disease and death, including against the dominant circulating virus, Delta. Current vaccines remain effective against severe disease and death.

9. Do current tests detect Omicron?

According to the WHO update on 28 November, 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.

10. What recommended actions should people take to keep safe?

The most effective steps people can take to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus including this new variant, **Omicron**, is to keep a physical distance of at least 2 meters from others; wear a face mask; open windows when possible to improve ventilation; avoid poorly ventilated or crowded spaces; wash hands with soap; cough or sneeze into a bent elbow or tissue; and get vaccinated as soon as it's available to you.

11. Why don't we have more definite answers about Omicron?

It is natural that we do not have definitive answers to all the questions surrounding this new variant yet, but scientific studies around the world are being conducted as fast as possible to better understand Omicron. While we wait for the next evidence in the coming days, please continue to observe the main preventive measures and stay informed with the latest scientific evidence through reliable information channels such as the official websites of IFRC, WHO, Africa CDC and your country's respective Ministry of Health.