

OMICRON VARIANT:

Information for chiropractors

December 10, 2021

On January 30, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (WHO). As of December 10, 2021 there have been over 267.9 million confirmed cases globally. There are currently over 5.28 million confirmed deaths.

On November 26, 2021, on the advice of WHO's Technical Advisory group on Virus Evolution (TAG-VE), WHO designated the variant B.1.1.529, referred to by the Greek letter 'Omicron', a variant of concern. The decision was based on evidence that Omicron has several mutations that may impact on how it behaves.

Chiropractors are primary contact health care professionals and to protect themselves, their patients and their communities they must stay current with the latest scientific evidence, information and advice.

The global situation regarding COVID-19 is evolving daily and advice may change over time pending developments and emerging scientific knowledge. This updated advice note is current as of December 10, 2021, based on WHO source material and has been produced with advice and guidance from the WFC Public Health Committee.

DECEMBER 2021 UPDATE ON WHO CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT OMICRON

Scientists are working to better understand the Omicron variant. WHO reports that at present there is insufficient information to make definitive conclusions about the nature of the variant, so caution is advised. WHO states, "The main uncertainties are (1) how transmissible the variant is and whether any increases are related to immune escape, intrinsic increased transmissibility, or both; (2) how well vaccines protect against infection, transmission, clinical disease of different degrees of severity and death; and (3) does the variant present with a different severity profile. Public health advice is based on current information and will be tailored as more evidence emerges around those key questions." [1]

Transmissibility

At a briefing on December 8, WHO Technical Lead, Dr Maria van Kerkhove commented, "The way countries react now will determine how Omicron unfolds no matter what we find out in terms of its transmission, its severity, its impact on our countermeasures. ... So we can't stress enough how important it is to act fast, to act robustly and I don't mean lock-down. We mean using proven public health tools to drive transmission

down in areas where transmission is high and to keep transmission low in areas where transmission is low because it still is quite a diverse situation around the world and Delta is dominant still globally." [2]

WHO stated "It is not yet clear whether Omicron is more transmissible (e.g., more easily spread from person to person) 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." [3]

Severity of disease

WHO states "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 from other variants. 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. All variants of COVID-19, including the Delta variant that is currently dominant worldwide, can cause severe disease or death, in particular for the most vulnerable people, and thus prevention is always key." [3]

WHO's Dr Soumya Swaminathan commented, "The data from country after country after country is showing that the people who are in the ICUs, the people who are severely ill, and the people who are dying are the unvaccinated. So, I think the message is loud and clear that it's a primary course of vaccination that is going to protect against severe disease and death. That has to be our goal..." [2]

Effectiveness of previous SARS-CoV-2 infection

According to WHO, "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. More information on this will become available in the coming days and weeks."(3)

Effectiveness of vaccines

"WHO is working with technical partners to understand the potential impact of this variant on 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." [3]

In a statement released on December 8, 2021, the WHO's Dr Mike Ryan said that there was no sign that Omicron would be better at evading vaccines than other variants and stressed the importance of vaccination in preventing the spread of all variants of COVID-19. [2]

Effectiveness of current tests

WHO reports that 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." [3]

Effectiveness of current treatments

According to WHO, "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." [3]

Studies underway

WHO provides the following update: "At the present time, WHO is coordinating with a large number of researchers around the world to better understand Omicron. Studies currently underway or underway shortly include assessments of transmissibility, severity of infection (including symptoms), performance of vaccines and diagnostic tests, and effectiveness of treatments.

WHO encourages countries to contribute the collection and sharing of hospitalized patient data through the WHO COVID-19 Clinical Data Platform to rapidly describe clinical characteristics and patient outcomes.

More information will emerge in the coming days and weeks. WHO's TAG-VE will continue to monitor and evaluate the data as it becomes available and assess how mutations in Omicron alter the behaviour of the virus." [3]

Recommended actions for countries

WHO recommendations include "As Omicron has been designated a Variant of Concern, there are several actions WHO recommends countries to undertake, including enhancing surveillance and sequencing of cases; sharing genome sequences on publicly available databases, such as GISAID; reporting initial cases or clusters to WHO; performing field investigations and laboratory assessments to better understand if Omicron has different transmission or disease characteristics, or impacts effectiveness of vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics or public health and social measures. ..." [3]

WHO advocates that "countries should continue to implement the effective public health measures to reduce COVID-19 circulation overall, using a risk analysis and science-based approach. They should increase some public health and medical capacities to manage an increase in cases. WHO is providing countries with support and guidance for both readiness and response." [3]

WHO stressed "In addition, it is vitally important that inequities in access to COVID-19 vaccines are urgently addressed to ensure that vulnerable groups everywhere, including health workers and older persons, receive their first and second doses, alongside equitable access to treatment and diagnostics." [3]

Recommended actions for people

WHO recommends that "the most effective steps individuals can take to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus is to keep a physical distance of at least 1 metre from others; wear a well-fitting mask; open windows to improve ventilation; avoid poorly ventilated or crowded spaces; keep hands clean; cough or sneeze into a bent elbow or tissue; and get vaccinated when it is their turn." [3]

WHO has indicated that it "will continue to provide updates as more information becomes available, including following meetings of the TAG-VE. In addition, information will be available on WHO's digital and social media platforms." [3]

Travel advice

WHO advises that "all travellers should be reminded to remain vigilant for signs and symptoms of COVID-19, to get vaccinated when it is their turn and to adhere to public health and social measures at all times and regardless of vaccination status, including by using masks appropriately, respecting physical distancing, following good respiratory etiquette and avoiding crowded and poorly ventilated spaces. Persons who are unwell, or who have not been fully vaccinated or do not have proof of previous SARS-CoV-2 infection and are at increased risk of developing severe disease and dying, including people 60 years of age or older or those with comorbidities that present increased risk of severe COVID-19 (e.g., heart disease, cancer and diabetes) should be advised to postpone travel to areas with community transmission." [4]

The World Federation of Chiropractic encourages all chiropractors to continue to stay up to date on emerging COVID-19 information by using reliable scientific sources such as the WHO website. For more information, please visit the WHO webpage on COVID-19 at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

References (hyperlinked)

1. Enhancing Readiness for Omicron (B.1.1.529): Technical Brief and Priority Actions for Member States
2. COVID-19 Virtual Press conference transcript - 8 December 2021
3. WHO Update on Omicron
4. WHO advice for international traffic in relation to the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant (B.1.1.529)

PLEASE BE ADVISED THAT THIS IS A FAST MOVING SITUATION AND THAT INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE MAY BE UPDATED AT SHORT NOTICE. CONTINUE TO OBSERVE PROVEN PREVENTATIVE PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES AS RECOMMENDED BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION.