

SUBJECT: **Omicron (B.1.1.529) Variant of Concern**

Date: November 29, 2021

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To: Primary Care Providers, Hospitals, Assessment Centres

From: Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum, Associate Medical Officer of Health

- The World Health Organization has designated the B.1.1.529 ‘Omicron’ variant as a variant of concern.
- This variant possesses a number of genetic mutations, and the impact of these mutations on transmission, immune escape, and other parameters is currently being investigated.
- Individuals who are returning or who have recently returned from seven southern African countries (South Africa, Eswatini, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Namibia) are subject to quarantine and testing requirements, regardless of their vaccination status.

On November 26, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) designated the B.1.1.529 COVID-19 variant as a variant of concern (VOC), named Omicron.¹ This variant was first reported to the WHO on November 24, 2021 by South Africa, where it has spread rapidly and is linked to a surge in cases. The Omicron variant has since been identified in a growing list of other countries. On November 28, 2021, Ontario confirmed two cases of the Omicron variant in the Ottawa region linked to recent travel to Nigeria.²

The Omicron variant has a large number of genetic mutations, including many mutations on the spike protein. The impact of these mutations is presently unknown; however, their location within the SARS-CoV-2 genome raises concerns that they may alter the virus’s transmissibility, immune escape, and susceptibility to treatment (e.g. monoclonal antibodies).³ Data that will help to characterize this variant are expected over the coming weeks.

Testing and Quarantine for Returning Travelers

As a precautionary measure, on November 26 the Government of Canada introduced additional border measures for travelers from seven nations in southern Africa (South Africa, Eswatini, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Namibia).

Foreign nationals who have travelled to any above-listed countries in the previous 14 days will not be permitted entry to Canada. Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and people with status under the *Indian Act* who have travelled to any above-listed countries in the previous 14 days must complete additional testing and a mandatory 14-day quarantine period, regardless of their vaccination status.⁴

Travelers who have already entered Canada from an above-listed country on or after November 13 are being directed by the Government of Canada to quarantine and get tested regardless of their vaccination status.⁴

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Effective November 26, anyone who has returned from or travelled in an above-listed country between November 1 and December 6 is eligible for PCR testing at assessment centres and specimen collection centres. Asymptomatic family members and other household contacts are also eligible for testing. This testing eligibility will remain in effect until further notice.

The list of affected countries may evolve over time as additional cases and clusters of Omicron are identified.

Surveillance for the Omicron Variant in Ontario

Since November 5, 2021, Ontario's COVID-19 Genomics Network has been performing whole genome sequencing (WGS) on 100% of eligible COVID-19 specimens. Current diagnostic tests are able to detect the Omicron variant.

Public Health Ontario publishes weekly epidemiological summaries that report the findings of Ontario's WGS surveillance. The most recent report (covering cases through November 6, 2021) found that 99.9% of cases were caused by Delta and 0.1% were caused by Gamma.⁵

Case, Contact, and Outbreak Management Measures

WDGPH will conduct case, contact, and outbreak management in accordance with the most recent provincial guidance. If there are any changes to the recommended measures because of the Omicron variant, these will be communicated promptly.

Baseline public health measures – such as masking, distancing, and optimizing ventilation – reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and are expected to be similarly effective against the Omicron variant. Getting fully vaccinated against COVID-19 is still strongly recommended and is expected to reduce the risk of being infected by any COVID-19 variant.

References:

1. World Health Organization. Classification of Omicron (B.1.1.529): SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern, November 26, 2021. Available at: [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/26-11-2021-classification-of-omicron-\(b.1.1.529\)-sars-cov-2-variant-of-concern](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/26-11-2021-classification-of-omicron-(b.1.1.529)-sars-cov-2-variant-of-concern)
2. Ontario Newsroom. Ontario confirms first two cases of Omicron variant, November 28, 2021. Available at: <https://news.ontario.ca/en/statement/1001241/ontario-confirms-first-two-cases-of-omicron-variant>
3. UK Health Security Agency. SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and variants under investigation in England, November 26, 2021. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1036501/Technical_Briefing_29_published_26_November_2021.pdf
4. Government of Canada. Government of Canada introduces new measures to address COVID-19 Omicron variant of concern, November 26, 2021. Available at:

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5. Public Health Ontario. SARS-CoV-2 Whole Genome Sequencing in Ontario, November 23, 2021. Available from: https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/epi/covid-19-sars-cov2-whole-genome-sequencing-epi-summary.pdf?sc_lang=en

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