



Omicron

An overview of the latest variant of concern and implications for public health

Context

The Omicron variant of Sars-Cov-2, first detected in South Africa is the now dominant strain of COVID-19 in the U.K. There is early evidence that Omicron has increased transmissibility, with case rates doubling currently every two to three days and analysis finding that the virus is more than three times as infectious as the currently dominant Delta variant. In addition, preliminary studies have suggested that the Omicron variant is able to partially evade the protection given by vaccines and previous infection from COVID-19, meaning that case numbers of this variant are likely to increase dramatically in the coming days, weeks, and months.

The severity of an infection by the Omicron variant of the virus is as of yet unknown. The World Health Organization has stated that emerging data points to the Omicron variant being no more severe than previous variants in terms of the symptoms it causes and the risk of hospitalisation or death, and anecdotal evidence has suggested that milder infection may in fact be the case with regards to Omicron's direct health impact.

COVID-19 response timelines

- On 06 December the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Sajid Javid confirmed that community transmission of the variant had been confirmed, meaning that cases of Omicron were being identified in individuals with no recent history of overseas travel.
- Since 13 December, the government have shifted to the U. K's 'Plan B' of social restrictions, whereby mandatory mask wearing, vaccine passport usage in venues and working from home measures are to be put in place from in order to curb the spread of this new variant and increase immunity through booster vaccine doses.
- The UK Chief Medical Officers on 12 December increased their assessment of the COVID-19 threat level to 4, and advice from SAGE is that the number of people requiring specialist hospital and community care could be significant over the coming period.
- The NHS declared a Level 4 National Incident on 13 December in recognition of the impact on the NHS of both supporting the vital increase in the vaccination programme and preparing for a potentially significant increase in COVID-19 cases.
- The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, declared a 'major incident' on 18 December. This permits coordination arrangements between key public services to be further stepped-up with the re-establishment of the Strategic Coordinating Group, which will have a Government representative enabling London to seek further support from government to address the pressures facing the city.

London cases and vaccination data¹

- On 05 Jan 2022 the daily number of new people tested positive for COVID-19 in London was reported as **22,558**.
- The total number of COVID-19 cases identified in London is **1,922,487** as of 05 Jan 2022, this compares to 11,706,635 cases for England as a whole.
- In the most recent week of complete data, 25 December 2021 - 31 December 2021, 154,730 cases were identified in London, a rate of **1719 cases per 100,000 population**. This compares with 180,876 cases and a rate of 2005 for the previous week.
- In the most recent week of complete data, 25 December 2021 - 31 December 2021, 930,912 cases were identified in England as a whole, a rate of 1646 cases per 100,000 population. This compares with 718,211 cases and a rate of 1270 for the previous week.
- Up to and including 04 Jan 2022 **6,315,575** people in London had received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and **5,729,015** had received two doses.
- Up to and including 04 Jan 2022 **3,637,110** people in London had received either a third vaccine dose or a booster dose.

The impact of Omicron to date on mental health and wellbeing

At this point in time, nothing is certain, and much about the Omicron variant is still unknown. However, as always with emerging issues, it is important to consider the potential effects of this crisis on population mental health and wellbeing.

The awareness of a new variant which can evade existing immunity built up through vaccination or previous infection to a certain extent, rising case numbers, the presence of tighter social restrictions and a possible return into a lockdown will all be a source of stress and anxiety for many Londoners.

As noted in previous waves of the pandemic, rates of depression and anxiety as well as overall happiness and life satisfaction follow patterns of national lockdowns, with people's wellbeing being lowest during periods with the tightest restrictions and returning to a level closer to pre-pandemic levels once these restrictions are eased.

The nuances of how to tackle the virus are not straightforward and the restrictions themselves do not have straightforward effects. Reflecting on previous waves of the virus, it is likely that further restrictions will have an impact on how people feel and cope over the festive period and into the New Year.

It is therefore important to continue to monitor all possible scenarios and developments over the coming days and weeks to ensure an agile response to the latest, and potentially most significant wave of the coronavirus pandemic thus far.

¹ City Intelligence Unit: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Cases and Vaccinations: <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/coronavirus--covid-19--cases>