



Health Alert:

SARS-CoV-2 Virus Variant of Concern B.1.1.529 (Omicron)

December 10, 2021

Situational Update

The [World Health Organization](#) designated a new SARS-CoV-2 variant, B.1.1.529 (Omicron) a variant of concern (VOC) on November 26, 2021. On December 1, the first case in the United States was reported in a San Francisco resident who had recently returned from travel to South Africa. As of December 9, the Omicron variant had been reported in more than 50 countries, and 23 states in the United States including elsewhere in California, with some areas reporting community transmission.

The Omicron variant has multiple genetic mutations that have the potential to increase transmissibility, reduce neutralization by convalescent and vaccine sera, and confer resistance to certain treatments. However, the full extent to which the Omicron variant may outcompete other circulating variants, or to which it may evade vaccine- or infection-derived immunity, remains uncertain. Early clinical data from South Africa, which has reported the most cases with this variant, suggests that it may not cause more severe disease, although more data are needed to confirm this. Current guidance for isolation and quarantine of confirmed or suspected Omicron cases **does not differ** from the [isolation and quarantine guidance](#) provided for other COVID-19 variants.

One of the mutations in the Omicron variant results in S-gene target failure (SGTF) in assays that include an S gene target, including the ThermoFisher TaqPath SARS-CoV-2 Combo RT-PCR assay. The isolates sequenced nationally and in California and the Bay Area remain almost entirely the Delta variant, which does not have SGTF with this assay. Therefore, screening for SGTF using this assay can presumptively identify the Omicron variant. However, whole genome sequencing must be performed to definitively identify the Omicron variant. Some large hospital systems in San Francisco routinely send positive SARS-CoV-2 specimens for whole genome sequencing. Available [reports from the FDA](#) suggest that standard PCR and antigen tests used in San Francisco continue to detect infection, including infection with Omicron.

San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) is taking several measures in response to the Omicron variant including:

- Conducting surveillance testing on a proportion of SARS-CoV-2 positive samples from across San Francisco to monitor for Omicron activity in our community.
- Prioritizing case investigation and contact tracing for confirmed or suspected Omicron cases.



- Recommending international travelers follow the [CDC guidance](#) to test for COVID-19 within 3-5 days after arrival, quarantine for 7 days if not fully vaccinated, and isolate and repeat testing if COVID-19 symptoms develop.
- Reminding the public to mask in indoor places regardless of vaccination status, and optimize mask fit and filtration.
- Emphasizing the importance of COVID-19 vaccination and booster efforts for all persons aged five years and older.

Recommendations for San Francisco providers:

San Francisco Department of Public Health recommends that providers:

- **Encourage COVID-19 vaccination for all persons aged five years and older, and boosters for all who are eligible.** COVID-19 vaccination remains the most important strategy to prevent serious illness and death from COVID-19.
- **Reinforce the importance of masking, physical distancing and other non-pharmaceutical interventions to minimize spread of SARS-CoV-2.**
- **Advise COVID-19 cases and close contacts on appropriate isolation and quarantine guidance.** Current guidance for isolation and quarantine of confirmed or suspected Omicron cases **does not differ** from the guidance provided for other COVID-19 variants. See most recent [SFDPH Isolation and Quarantine Guidance](#). SFDPH is not requesting providers to report cases with a history of travel because, as noted above, cases have been reported widely and prevention and control measures for the Omicron variant do not differ from other variants.

Resources

[Fact Sheet: Omicron Variant \(ca.gov\)](#)

[CDPH Health Alert: Omicron \(B.1.1.529\) Variant Omicron Health](#)

[CDC Health Advisory: Omicron \(B.1.1.529\) Variant](#)

[CDC Guidance for International Travel](#)

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