Experts hopeful omicron causes more mild illness, but questions remain

Stephen Loiaconi

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WASHINGTON (TND) — Weeks after the omicron variant of COVID-19 was first identified in South Africa, experts and health officials still have more questions than answers about how threatening the new strain is and how widely it might spread in the United States.

“We have a hunch of how dangerous this variant is,” said Dr. Perry Halkitis, dean of the Rutgers School of Public Health. “We don’t have a complete data set on it... Our hunch is it’s highly transmissible, yet less virulent than delta.”r

One thing that has become clear in South Africa and elsewhere is that the omicron variant can spread more easily than the delta variant. Amid a sudden “tidal wave” of cases, British officials said Sunday omicron could become the dominant strain in the country within days.

“Given the current available data, it is likely that omicron will outpace the delta variant where community transmission occurs,” the World Health Organization said Sunday.

Delta transmission was relatively low in South Africa when omicron first emerged and spread rapidly there. As omicron moves to countries that already had high levels of delta infections, it appears capable of supplanting the previous variant as the primary driver of infection.

“It clearly has a transmission advantage,” said Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, on ABC’s “This Week.”

The U.S. SARS-CoV-2 Interagency Group has identified only two variants as “variants of concern”: delta and omicron. The omicron variant has more than 50 mutations from the original strain, including 32 on the spike protein, while delta has fewer than 20.

Omicron has been identified in at least 30 U.S. states, and officials believe there are far more cases out there that have not been detected. Delta is still responsible for nearly all infections in states currently experiencing surges, though, and it is unclear when or if that might change.

“We can't really transfer the experience from one country to another, because there's different levels of immunity in different populations, different countries, and also different states as you even move across the United States,” Dr. Scott Gottlieb, former head of the Food and Drug Administration, said on CBS’ “Face the Nation.”

While federal officials have cited encouraging signs that omicron could cause less severe illness than delta, they caution it is still early to draw firm conclusions. Lower hospitalization rates in South Africa could be the result of a less harmful strain, but it is also possible existing immunity blunted the impact in many who were infected.

According to South Africa’s National Institute for Communicable Disease, patients hospitalized due to omicron have been less seriously ill than during previous waves, have stayed in the hospital for shorter periods of time, and have been far less likely to die. The vast majority of those who have wound up hospitalized have been unvaccinated.

“Generally, as viruses continue to perpetuate in the environment, they replicate in such a way that leads to less harmful strains,” Halkitis said.

The World Health Organization said in a technical brief published Friday that all omicron cases identified in Europe to date have been mild or asymptomatic. However, there has been at least one death associated with the variant in the United Kingdom.

“The responsible way to say is that [it is] a little bit early to say that it's mild,” Tulio de Oliveira, director of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation in South Africa, told CBS News. “What we're going to have to tease apart, if it's a mild case, is do young people get infected, or if the previous population are immune from infection and vaccination.”

The WHO technical brief stated most therapeutic treatments that worked against the delta variant would likely remain effective against omicron. However, it added more research would be needed on virus neutralization by monoclonal antibodies.

Preliminary data suggests increased transmission due to omicron is likely among those who are vaccinated or previously infected, but experts remain confident vaccines and boosters will continue to offer reliable protection against severe outcomes. A small study of omicron patients led by the British Health Security Agency estimated the effectiveness of initial vaccine doses diminished by at least half against the new variant, but a booster shot restored most efficacy.

"I'm afraid it is now clear that two doses of vaccine are simply not enough to give the level of protection we all need," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a televised address Sunday, adding that scientists believe a third dose can provide sufficient protection.

Another analysis released Monday by researchers at the University of Oxford found a "substantial fall" in neutralizing antibodies against omicron compared to other variants. The authors predicted a rise in breakthrough infections as a result, although they noted there is no evidence that the vaccinated face a higher risk of severe illness or death from omicron.

Of the first 43 omicron cases reported in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday most were mild, one required hospitalization, and none resulted in death. Most of those cases were among the vaccinated, though, including 14 people who had received booster shots.

The omicron variant has so far hit younger age groups harder than delta or other previous variants, and it resulted in a significant uptick in child hospitalizations in South Africa. Again, though, experts are uncertain if that means children are inherently more susceptible to this strain, and the number of older patients has also begun to rise.

"What we have seen in the beginning is a large number of young children being hospitalized," de Oliveira said. "But these numbers are being decreased as this variant starts spreading in the older population."

A strain that spreads faster than delta but causes less hospitalization and death could help bolster immunity in communities as more people recover from infections. It could also help nudge the U.S. toward a point where COVID-19 is more of an endemic inconvenience like the flu than a constant threat, particularly if vaccines continue to offer some degree of protection.

"That could be the end of this nightmare," Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, told The National Desk Friday.

The end might still be far off, though, and Halkitis stressed a need for continued vigilance and mitigation. Even if vaccines and boosters work against omicron and future variants, many will likely remain unprotected and people could continue to die every year, as they do from the flu.

"We have to emotionally prepare for this virus to be with us for the foreseeable future," he said.