

First UK cases of Omicron variant identified

- Individuals and their households are self-isolating and contact tracing is ongoing
- From 04:00 Sunday 28 November Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Angola will be added to the UK's travel red list

After overnight genome sequencing, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has confirmed that two cases of COVID-19 with mutations consistent with B.1.1.529 have been identified in the UK.

The individuals that have tested positive, and all members of their households, are being re-tested and told to self-isolate while further testing and contact tracing is underway. One case has been located in Chelmsford and the other in Nottingham. The two cases are linked and there is a link to travel to Southern Africa. UKHSA is carrying out targeted testing at locations where the positive cases were likely to have been infectious.

In response to the developing situation, the UK is taking decisive action to protect public health. Confirmed cases and contacts are being followed up and requested to isolate and get tested as necessary.

In addition, in line with updated advice from the UKHSA, from 4am Sunday Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Angola will be added to the travel red list. Travellers who have returned from these four countries in last 10 days must isolate and get a PCR test. UKHSA are following up recent arrivals from these countries.

This adds to the six countries placed on the red list on Friday.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Sajid Javid said:

Thanks to our world class genomic sequencing we have been made aware of two UK cases of the Omicron variant. We have moved rapidly and the individuals are self-isolating while contact tracing is ongoing.

We will do all we can to protect the UK public against this emerging threat and that is why we are surging testing capacity to the impacted communities and introducing travel restrictions on a further four countries: Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Angola. We will not hesitate to take further action if required.

This is a stark reminder that we are not yet out of this pandemic. Getting the vaccine has never been more important – please come forward for your first jab if you haven't already and if eligible, book your booster as soon as possible.

Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, said:

We will continue to work closely with the international community to quickly gather and analyse information on this variant to understand any possible increase in transmissibility or resistance to vaccines.

It is important that everyone takes sensible precautions – get a PCR test if you have symptoms, isolate when asked, wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces, ventilate rooms, get your vaccine and boosters as soon as you can.

Dr Jenny Harries, Chief Executive of UKHSA, said:

We have identified these cases thanks to the UK's advanced sequencing capabilities which means we are able to find variants and take rapid action to limit onward spread. We are particularly grateful to public health colleagues in South Africa for early sharing of information on the Omicron variant to support global health security.

We are continuing our efforts to understand the effect of this variant on transmissibility, severe disease, mortality, antibody response and vaccine efficacy.

If you have any COVID-19 symptoms you must isolate and get a PCR test immediately.

It remains vital to come forward for vaccination, wear a face covering in crowded places and try to meet people in well-ventilated areas.

From 04:00 on Sunday 28 November non-UK and Irish nationals and residents who have been in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Angola in the previous 10 days will be refused entry into England. This does not apply to those who have stayed airside and only transited through any of these countries while changing flights.

UK and Irish nationals and residents arriving from 04:00 Sunday 28 November must isolate in a government-approved facility for 10 days. During their stay, they will be required to take a coronavirus PCR test on day 2 and day 8.

The UKHSA designated variant B.1.1.529 as a variant under investigation (VuI) on Thursday 25 November. In response, the government announced that six African countries – South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Namibia – would be added to the red list.

The B.1.1.529 variant includes a large number of spike protein mutations as

well as mutations in other parts of the viral genome. These are potentially biologically significant mutations which may change the behaviour of the virus with regards to vaccines, treatments and transmissibility.

The UK Health Security Agency, in partnership with scientific bodies across the globe, is constantly monitoring the status of SARS-CoV-2 variants as they emerge and develop worldwide.

As viruses mutate often and at random, it is not unusual for small numbers of cases to arise featuring new sets of mutations. Any variants showing evidence of spread are rapidly assessed.

We are particularly grateful to health protection specialists and the Government of South Africa for early sharing of local information on the omicron variant in an exemplary way to support global health security.