

# Oral Statement on B.1.1.529 variant

Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker. With permission I'd like to update the House on COVID-19.

But before I begin, I want to wish the Shadow Secretary of State well, as he recovers from COVID-19.

Madam Deputy Speaker, over the past 48 hours, a small number of cases of a new variant have been detected on our international genomic database.

I want to reassure this House that there are no detected cases of this variant in the UK at this time but this new variant is of huge international concern.

The World Health Organisation has called a special meeting this morning – and that meeting is taking place right now.

I want to update the House on what we know so far, why we're concerned, and the action that we are taking although I must stress, that this is a fast-moving situation, and there remains a high degree of uncertainty.

The sequence of this variant – currently called B.1.1.529 – was first uploaded by Hong Kong, from a case of someone travelling from South Africa.

The UK was the first country to identify the potential threat of this new variant and alert international partners.

Further cases have been identified in South Africa and in Botswana and it is highly likely that it has now spread to other countries.

Yesterday, the South African government held a press conference, where they provided an update on what they know so far.

I want to put on record my thanks to South Africa, not only for their rigorous scientific response but the openness and transparency with which they have acted much as we did here in the United Kingdom, when we first detected what is now known as the Alpha variant.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are concerned that this new variant may pose a substantial risk to public health.

The variant has an unusually large number of mutations.

Yesterday, the UK Health Security Agency classified B.1.1.529 as a new Variant Under Investigation and the Variant Technical Group has designated it as a Variant Under Investigation with Very High Priority.

It's the only variant with this designation, making it higher priority than Beta.

It shares many of the features of the Alpha, Beta and Delta variants.

Early indications show this variant may be more transmissible than the Delta variant and current vaccines may be less effective against it.

It may also impact the effectiveness of one of our major treatments, Ronapreve.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we're also worried about the rise in cases in countries in Southern Africa especially as these populations should have significant natural immunity.

In South Africa in particular, there has been exponential growth, with cases increasing fourfold over the last two weeks.

In Gauteng Province – which includes Johannesburg and Pretoria – some 80 percent of cases, when tested with a PCR test, have shown something that is known as the 'S-Gene dropout' which we associate with this variant.

So while we don't know yet definitely whether the exponential growth in South Africa is directly associated with this new variant, this PCR test analysis does indicate that there could be many more cases of this new variant than just those that have been sequenced so far.

So Madam Deputy Speaker, even as we continue to learn more about this new variant, one of the lessons of this pandemic has been that we must move quickly, and at the earliest possible moment.

The UK remains in a strong position.

We've made tremendous gains as a result of the decisions that we took over the summer and the initial success of our booster programme.

But we're heading into winter and our booster programme is still ongoing. So we must act with caution.

So we're taking the following steps:

Yesterday I announced that – from midday today – we're placing six countries in Southern Africa on the travel red list.

Those countries are: South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia, and Zimbabwe.

Anyone who is not a UK or Irish resident who has been in one of these countries in the last 10 days will be denied entry into England.

UK and Irish residents arriving from these countries – from 4 am on Sunday – will enter hotel quarantine.

Anyone arriving before those dates should take PCR tests on day 2 and day 8 – even if they are vaccinated and isolate at home – along with the rest of their household.

If you've arrived from any of these countries in the last 10 days NHS Test and Trace will be contacting you and asking you to take a PCR test.

But do not wait to be contacted – you should take PCR tests right away.

We have been working closely with the Devolved Administrations on this, and they will be aligning their response.

In recent hours, Israel has also taken similar precautions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to stress that we're working quickly, and we're working with a high degree of uncertainty.

We are continuing to make assessments, including about those countries with strong travel links to South Africa and we're working with our international partners – including South Africa and the European Union – to ensure an aligned response.

But this variant is a reminder for all of us that this pandemic is far from over.

We must continue to act with caution, and do all we can to keep this virus at bay including, once you are eligible, getting your booster shot.

We've already given over 16 million booster shots.

The booster jab was already important before we knew about this variant – but now, it could not be more important.

So please, if you're eligible get your booster shot, do not delay.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we've made great progress against this virus – progress that we're determined to hold on to.

This government will continue do whatever is necessary to keep us safe – and we've all got our part to play.

I commend this statement to the House.