

SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.7 Variant Identified in Pennsylvania Resident

DATE:	1/7/2021
TO:	Health Alert Network
FROM:	Rachel Levine, MD, Secretary of Health
SUBJECT:	SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.7 Variant Identified in Pennsylvania Resident
DISTRIBUTION:	Statewide
LOCATION:	n/a
STREET ADDRESS:	n/a
COUNTY:	n/a
MUNICIPALITY:	n/a
ZIP CODE:	n/a

This transmission is a “Health Alert,” conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

HOSPITALS: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL; **EMS COUNCILS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **FQHCs:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE **LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP; **LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES:** PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, INFECTION CONTROL, AND NURSING STAFF IN YOUR FACILITY

- On January 5, 2021, DOH identified a case of COVID-19 with the “UK variant” (20B/50Y.V1 or B.1.1.7) in Dauphin County. An investigation to determine possible exposures and perform contact tracing is underway.
- The B.1.1.7 variant has been identified in a handful of other states and is likely already present in other parts of the country.
- Labs using the ThermoFisher TaqPath COVID-19 RT-PCR assay that identify specimens where the Orf and N gene are Cts <28 with no detection of the S gene should contact the DOH lab to discuss submission of samples.
- Please contact the DOH lab at 610-280-3464 to notify staff that samples will be submitted.
- Initial studies of the B.1.1.7 variant indicate that it may be more infectious than previously identified strains of SARS-CoV-2; however, it is not associated with more severe symptoms.
- The currently approved vaccines are likely effective against this variant.
- Because of the increased infectivity of this variant, contacts of cases infected with B.1.1.7 are required to complete a full 14-day quarantine.
- People should continue to practice COVID-19 mitigation measures including avoiding gathering with others outside their household, continuing to wear masks, increasing handwashing, ventilating indoor spaces, and staying at least six feet apart from others.
- If you have questions about this guidance, please call your local health department or 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258).

Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) provides this guidance based on available information about COVID-19 and is subject to change.

In mid-December, the “UK variant” of COVID-19 (20B/501Y.V1 or B.1.1.7) was announced as a variant of concern. The newly emerged UK variant B.1.1.7 strain has an unusually large number of mutations. The variant was first detected in September 2020 in the United Kingdom and since November 2020 has been highly prevalent in London and southeast England. This variant was first detected in the United States in Colorado on December 29th and has subsequently been identified in a handful of other states, including California, New York, and Florida.

On January 5, DOH was notified of an international traveler currently residing in Dauphin County Pennsylvania who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, and sequencing confirmed that the virus was the B.1.1.7 strain. DOH is conducting a case investigation and contact tracing for the confirmed B.1.1.7 variant case. The case has a history of international travel during their exposure period.

Preliminary epidemiological indicators suggest that this variant is associated with increased transmission (i.e., more efficient and rapid transmission). Currently, there is no evidence that the variant causes more severe illness or death, and it is likely that the currently approved vaccines are effective against the variant. A higher rate of transmission with variant strains may lead to more cases, which would increase the number of people overall who need clinical care.

Since this variant may be more easily spread between people, vigilant adherence to and emphasis on public health measures such as wearing a mask, maintaining physical distance from others, avoiding crowds, ventilating indoor spaces, and frequent hand washing is vitally important.

DOH expects that all currently available diagnostic tests will produce a positive result for COVID-19 for patients infected with B.1.1.7 and other commonly circulating COVID-19 viruses. DOH continues to recommend testing for symptomatic patients and their close contacts.

Labs performing the ThermoFisher TaqPath COVID-19 RT-PCR assay should forward any positive samples without a signal for the S gene and Cycle threshold values for N and Orf1ab <28 to the DOH lab for sequence characterization. Please contact the DOH lab at 610-280-3464 to notify staff that samples will be submitted. Include Ct values with all samples submitted.

While in some cases of COVID-19 [shorter quarantines](#) might be appropriate, for contacts of cases infected with B.1.1.7, a full 14-day quarantine is required. All Pennsylvania residents should continue to get tested if they are symptomatic or have been exposed to a person with COVID-19 and follow protocols for [isolation](#) and [quarantine](#).

The potential presence of the variant strain circulating in Pennsylvania should not deter people from obtaining the COVID-19 vaccine, as the currently approved vaccines are likely effective against this variant.

If you have questions about this guidance, please call your local health department or **1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258)**.

Individuals interested in receiving further PA-HANs are encouraged to register at <https://han.pa.gov/>.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of January 7, 2021 but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.