

What You Can Do to Avoid the New Coronavirus Variant Right Now

It's more contagious than the original and spreading quickly. Upgrade your mask and double down on precautions to protect yourself.

Credit...Getty Images



By Tara Parker-Pope

- Published Jan. 19, 2021 Updated Feb. 3, 2021

[Leer en español](#)

New [variants](#) of the coronavirus continue to emerge. A few have caused concern in the United States because they are so contagious and spreading fast. To avoid them, you'll need to double down on the same pandemic precautions that have kept you safe so far.

The variant known as B.1.1.7., which was first identified in Britain has the potential to infect [an estimated 50 percent more people](#), and researchers have begun to think that it may also be slightly more deadly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has predicted that this variant could become the dominant source of infection in the United States by March. A variant first reported in South Africa has found its way to [South Carolina](#). And scientists are studying whether a variant with a different mutation, and [first found in Denmark](#), along with [one identified in California](#), have caused a surge of cases in California.

The new variants appear to latch onto our cells more efficiently. (You can find a detailed look [inside one of the variants here](#).) The change suggests it could take less virus and less time in the same room with an infected person for someone to become ill. People infected with the variant may also shed larger quantities of virus, which increases the risk to people around them.

“The exact mechanism in which it's more transmissible isn't entirely known,” said [Nathan D. Grubaugh](#), assistant professor and epidemiologist at the Yale School of Public Health. “It might just be that when you're infected, you're exhaling more infectious virus.”

So how do you avoid a more contagious version of the coronavirus? I spoke with some of the leading virus and infectious disease experts about what makes the new variant so worrisome and what we can do about it. Here's what they had to say.

How can I protect myself from the new coronavirus variant?

The variants spread the same way the [coronavirus](#) has always spread. You're most likely to contract the virus if you spend time in an enclosed space breathing the air of an infected person. The same things that have protected you from the original strain should help protect you from a variant, although you may need to be more rigorous. Wear a two- or three-layer mask. Don't spend time indoors with people not from your household. Avoid crowds, and keep your distance. Wash your hands often, and avoid touching your face.

"The first thing I say to people is that it's not a different virus. All the things we have learned about this virus still apply," said [Dr. Ashish K. Jha](#), dean of the Brown University School of Public Health. "It's not like this variant is somehow magically spreading through other means. Anything risky under the normal strain just becomes riskier with the variant."

And let's face it, after months of pandemic living, many of us have become lax about our Covid safety precautions. Maybe you've let down your guard, and you're spending time indoors and unmasked with trusted friends. Or perhaps you've been dining in restaurants or making more trips to the grocery store each week than you did at the start of lockdowns. The arrival of the variant means you should try to cut back on potential exposures where you can and double down on basic precautions for the next few months until you and the people around you get vaccinated.

"The more I hear about the new variants, the more concerned I am," said [Linsey Marr](#), professor of civil and environmental engineering at Virginia Tech and one of the world's leading aerosol scientists. "I think there is no room for error or sloppiness in following precautions, whereas before, we might have been able to get away with letting one slide."

Should I upgrade my mask?

You should be wearing a high-quality mask when you run errands, go shopping or find yourself in a situation where you're spending time indoors with people who don't live with you, Dr. Marr said. "I am now wearing my best mask when I go to the grocery

store,” she said. “The last thing I want to do is get Covid-19 in the month before I get vaccinated.”

Dr. Marr’s lab recently tested 11 mask materials and found that the right cloth mask, properly fitted, does a good job of filtering viral particles of the size most likely to cause infection. The best mask has three layers — two cloth layers with a filter sandwiched in between. Masks should be fitted around the bridge of the nose and made of flexible material to reduce gaps. Head ties create a better fit than ear loops.

If you don’t want to buy a new mask, a simple solution is to wear an additional mask when you find yourself in closer proximity to strangers. I wear a single mask when I walk my dog or exercise outdoors. But if I’m going to a store, taking a taxi or getting in the subway, I double mask by using a disposable surgical mask and covering it with my cloth mask.

Do I need an N95 medical mask?

While medical workers who come into close contact with sick patients rely on the gold-standard N95 masks, you don’t need that level of protection if you’re avoiding group gatherings, limiting shopping trips and keeping your distance from others.

“N95s are hard to get,” said Dr. Jha. “I don’t think people should think that’s what they need. Certainly there are a lot of masks out in the marketplace that are pretty good.”

If you’re working in an office or grocery store, or find yourself in a situation where you want added mask protection, you can get an alternative to the N95. Dr. Jha suggested [using a KF94 mask](#), a type of mask made in South Korea that can be purchased easily online. It resembles an N95, with some differences. It’s made of a similar nonwoven material that blocks 94 percent of the hardest-to-trap viral particles. But the KF94 has ear loops, instead of elastic head bands, so it won’t fit as snugly as an N95.

The KF94 is also disposable — you can buy a pack of 20 for about \$40 on Amazon. While you can let a KF94 mask air dry and reuse it a few times, it can’t be laundered and won’t last as long as a cloth mask. One solution is to save your KF94 mask for higher-risk situations — like riding a subway, spending time in a store or going to a doctor’s appointment. Use your cloth mask for outdoor errands, exercise or walking the dog.

Are there additional ways to reduce my risk?

Getting the vaccine is the ultimate way to reduce risk. But until then, take a look at your activities and try reducing the time and number of exposures to other people.

Covid-19 Vaccines ›

Answers to Your Vaccine Questions

Am I eligible for the Covid vaccine in my state?

Currently more than 150 million people — almost half the population — are eligible to be vaccinated. But [each state makes the final decision about who goes first](#). The nation's 21 million health care workers and three million residents of long-term care facilities were the first to qualify. In mid-January, federal officials urged all states [to open up eligibility](#) to everyone 65 and older and to adults of any age with medical conditions that put them at high risk of becoming seriously ill or dying from Covid-19. [Adults in the general population are at the back of the line](#). If federal and state health officials can clear up bottlenecks in vaccine distribution, everyone 16 and older will become eligible as early as this spring or early summer. The vaccine hasn't been approved in children, although studies are underway. It may be months before a vaccine is available for anyone under the age of 16. [Go to your state health website](#) for up-to-date information on vaccination policies in your area

Is the vaccine free?

Can I choose which vaccine I get?

How long will the vaccine last? Will I need another one next year?

Will my employer require vaccinations?

Where can I find out more?

For instance, if you now go to the store two or three times a week, cut back to just once a week. If you've been spending 30 to 45 minutes in the grocery store, cut your time down to 15 or 20 minutes. If the store is crowded, come back later. If you're waiting in line, be mindful of staying at least six feet apart from the people ahead of you and behind you. Try delivery or curbside pickup, if that's an option for you.

If you've been spending time indoors with other people who aren't from your household, consider skipping those events until you and your friends get vaccinated. If you must spend time with others, wear your best mask, make sure the space is well ventilated (open windows and doors) and keep the visit as short as possible. It's still safest to take your social plans outdoors. And if you are thinking about air travel, it's a good idea to reschedule given the high number of cases around the country and the emergence of the more contagious variant.

"The new variants are making me think twice about my plan to teach in-person, which would have been with masks and with good ventilation anyway," Dr. Marr said. "They're making me think twice about getting on an airplane."

Will the current Covid vaccines work against the new variants?

Experts are cautiously optimistic that the current generation of vaccines will be mostly effective against the emerging coronavirus variants. [Earlier this month](#), Pfizer and BioNTech [announced](#) that their Covid vaccine works against one of the key mutations

present in some of the variants. That's good news, but some data also suggest that variants with certain mutations, particularly the one first seen in South Africa, [may be more resistant to the vaccines](#). While the data are concerning, experts said the current vaccines generate extremely high levels of antibodies, and they are likely to at least prevent serious illness in people who are immunized and get infected.

“The reason why I'm cautiously optimistic is that from what we know about how vaccines work, it's not just one antibody that provides all the protection,” said [Dr. Adam Lauring](#), associate professor of infectious disease at the University of Michigan. “When you get vaccinated you generate antibodies all over the spike protein. That makes it less likely that one mutation here or there is going to leave you completely unprotected. That's what gives me reason for optimism that this is going to be OK in terms of the vaccine, but there's more work to be done.”

If I catch Covid-19, will I know if I have the new variant?

Probably not. If you test positive for the coronavirus, the standard PCR test can't definitively determine if you have the variant or the original strain. While some PCR test results can signal if a person is likely to be infected with a variant, that information probably won't be shared with patients. The only way to know for sure which variant is circulating is to use gene sequencing technology, but that technology is not used to alert individuals of their status. While some public health and university laboratories are using genomic surveillance to track the prevalence of variants in a community, the United States doesn't yet have a large-scale, nationwide system for checking coronavirus genomes for new mutations.

Treatment for Covid-19 is the same whether you have the original strain or the variant. You can read more about [what to do if you get infected here](#).

Are children more at risk from the new variant?

Children appear to get infected with the variant at about the same rate as the original strain. A large study by health officials in Britain found that young children are only about half as likely as adults to transmit the variant to others. While that's good news, the highly contagious nature of the variant means more children will get the virus, even if they are still proportionately less contagious and less prone to getting infected than adults. You can learn [more here](#).

If I've already had Covid-19, am I likely to have the same level of immunity to the new strain?

Most experts agree that once you've had Covid-19, your body has some level of natural immunity to help fight off a second infection — although it's not known [how long the protection lasts](#). The variants circulating in Brazil and South Africa appear to have mutations that allow the virus to evade natural antibodies and reinfect someone who

has already had the virus. The concern is based on lab tests using antibodies of people with a previous infection, so whether that translates to more reinfections in the real world isn't known. The effect of the vaccine against these variants isn't known yet either. While all of this sounds frightening, scientists are hopeful that even if the vaccines don't fully protect against new variations of the virus, the antibodies generated by the vaccine still will protect people from more serious illness.

Tara Parker-Pope is the founding editor of [Well](#), The Times's award-winning consumer health site. She won an Emmy in 2013 for the video series "[Life, Interrupted](#)" and is the author of "For Better: The Science of a Good Marriage." [@taraparkerpop](#)

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 24, 2021, Section D, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Adapt to Variants Of the Coronavirus. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)