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NEWS

# New coronavirus variant could take over by spring, experts say

Proactive testing, faster vaccinations and strict adherence to health guidelines are needed to prevent new surges, say scientists.



A nurse holds a vial of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at a hospital in London. Company executives say they are confident the vaccine works against the UK variant of the virus, but further studies are needed to be completely sure. (Frank Augstein / AP)




<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2021/01/16/new-coronavirus-variant-could-take-over-by-spring-experts-say/>

By [Anna Kuchment](#) and [Sue Ambrose](#)  
6:00 AM on Jan 16, 2021 CST



A more contagious variant of COVID-19 first detected in England has hit North Texas just as hospitals are being stretched to the limit. Even as vaccines roll out in Dallas-Fort Worth, experts worry they aren't reaching people fast enough to stay ahead of the variant, which they fear will trigger a new surge.

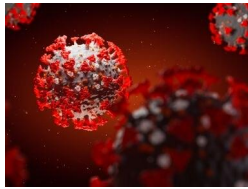
Even without the new United Kingdom variant, Dallas County averaged about 2,200 new cases each day over the last week. And a forecast released Thursday by UT Southwestern Medical Center predicts that daily new cases will climb to 3,300 by the end of the month.



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BY JESUS JIMENEZ ·

The U.K. variant, estimated to have emerged in England in September, now accounts for about three-quarters of all new COVID-19 cases there. It was first detected in the U.S. at the end of December and in Houston a week later. Dallas County reported its first known case Saturday. In a new study, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention projected the variant would become the dominant source of infection in the U.S. by March.

“If the transmission levels of the new variant look similar in Texas compared to estimates coming out from the U.K., then what we can expect is it is likely to take hold within the state and accelerate transmission locally,” said Spencer Fox, a researcher who builds pandemic forecasts at the University of Texas at Austin.

Experts say the U.K. variant is just one of many reasons to worry about high levels of virus transmission. Even though the U.K. variant is not known to make people sicker, and current vaccines should work against it, the fact that it can spread faster could further strain hospitals.

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Experts also warn that with so much virus in the community, new more contagious and possibly more dangerous variants could emerge.

“We’ve got to get the burden of disease down as soon as possible,” said Dr. John Carlo, a former medical director of Dallas County’s health department who now runs a local network of HIV clinics. “We’re providing more and more opportunities for this virus to create new variants that may escape our immune system at the very least, but could also change in terms of how severe the illness is.”

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## More contagious

Experts believe the U.K. variant, known as B.1.1.7, is between 40% and 70% more transmissible than pre-existing strains. One [report](#) from England, for instance, found that people carrying the new variant infected about 15% of their contacts, compared to only 10% for other variants.

Another [study](#) from British researchers found similar statistics and projected the new variant would require strict control measures. Just before Christmas, the U.K. imposed a lockdown in London and other parts of the country, closing non-essential businesses, schools and universities. The restrictions appear to be working, British officials said last week.



A man wearing a face mask to curb the spread of coronavirus walks past temporarily closed shops in Camden Town, an area of London usually bustling with tourists and visitors to its market, on Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2021, during England's third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. (Matt Dunham)

Scientists are also concerned about two other new, more transmissible variants, one first identified in South Africa, the other in Brazil.

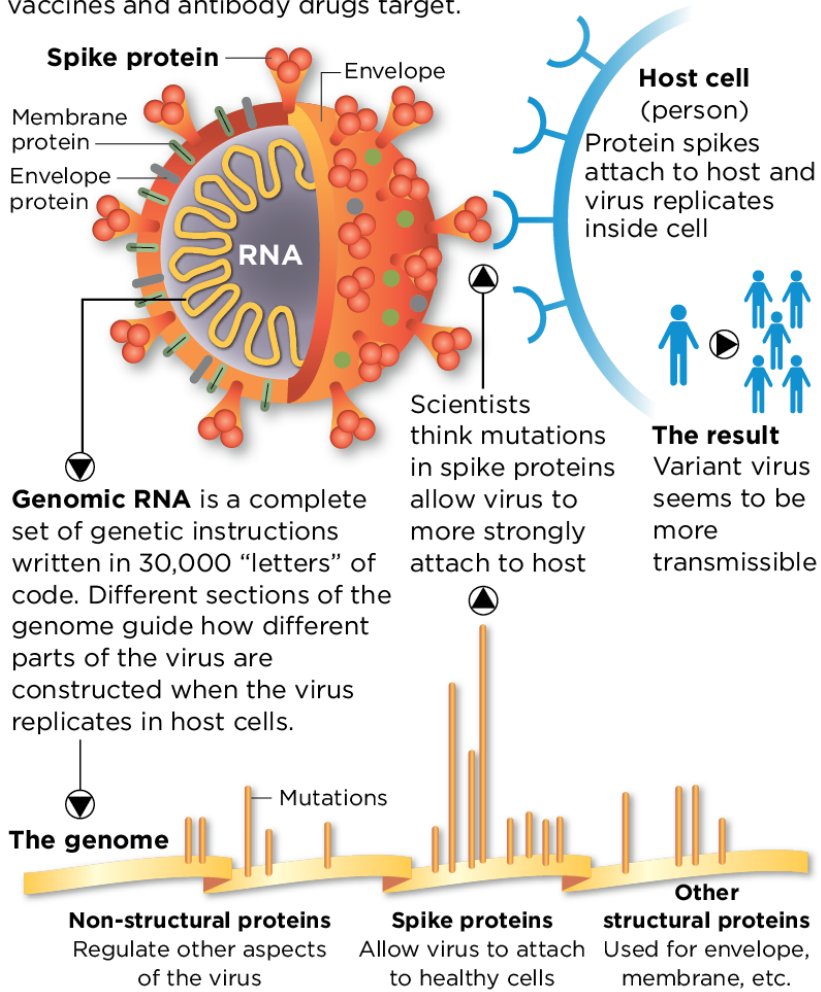
New **research** from scientists at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle suggests those two strains, which have not yet been detected in the U.S., could be harder for the human immune system to fight off. That means people who have recovered from COVID-19 could be re-infected with the new variants, and the variants may also reduce the effectiveness of certain drugs. That isn't thought to be the case with the U.K. variant, however.

The South African strain might be able to evade a monoclonal antibody treatment made by Eli Lilly, the company's CEO told **CNBC** last week. The treatment is geared toward newly diagnosed patients at high risk for COVID-19 complications.

Scientists are not surprised that more infectious versions of the coronavirus have emerged. In fact, that has happened before. The coronavirus variant that currently predominates in the U.S. and around the world is different from the first viruses detected in China at the beginning of the pandemic.

### The new coronavirus variant

The new variant of the virus that causes COVID-19 has several mutations on its spike proteins. These spikes are used by the virus to attach to and infect cells. The spikes also are what vaccines and antibody drugs target.



SOURCE: The Associated Press, Reuters, Dallas Morning News reporting Carol Zuber-Mallison/Staff Artist

Some say the U.S. likely has its own, more contagious homegrown variants. But the U.S. hasn't done as much genetic analysis of virus samples as some other countries.

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