

Recent Developments

As far as the new variant is concerned, the Department of Health has reported a total of 17 cases infected with the United Kingdom (UK) variant in the country. The first case was detected from someone who returned from the United Arab Emirates last January 7. Sixteen (16) new cases were recently detected, 12 of which are from Bontoc, Mountain Province. Two are returning overseas Filipino workers from Lebanon while the remaining two were detected in La Trinidad, Benguet and Calamba City, Laguna. Of the 16 new cases, 13 are active cases and three have already recovered.

Sulu went under a 14-day total lockdown last January 4 to prevent entry of another new variant detected in nearby Sabah. Travel restrictions were eventually lifted on January 18. Three active cases, 12 deaths were reported in the province as of January 14 while there were 251 positive test results. In Cotabato City, an asymptomatic OFW was exposed to COVID-19 UK variant last January 26. The Ministry of Health in Bangsamoro Region said the OFW is closely monitored by health officials.

The Department of Health is currently intensifying its contact tracing efforts to control transmission of the new COVID-19 variant. The DOH continues to emphasize the importance of practicing the minimum public health standards to halt transmission of the virus.



COVID-19 VARIANTS AND HOW TO REPORT ON THEM

There is widespread concern that some new variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, appear to be more infectious than previous strains of the virus. Multiple variants of the virus have been documented globally during this pandemic, but scientists say that new variants identified in both the UK (B.1.1.7) and South Africa (501.V2) appear to spread faster and are 40 to 70 percent more transmissible. **A new variant in Brazil (B.1.1.248) was also recently discovered and said to share many mutations with one first identified in South Africa.**

Although there's no evidence yet that the variants are more deadly, many countries closed their borders to travelers from UK as they worked on how to deal with the possible new threat. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the characteristics of these variants were rapidly emerging.

What you need to know?

What is the difference between a strain and a variant?

The terms “strain” and “variant” are often used interchangeably. But the distinctions are important.

STRAIN - In general, if a virus has enough mutations to make its biology significantly different it may be considered “new strain”. This means that it may respond differently to vaccines or treatments, or it may infect a different species or transmit in a different way.

VARIANT - If the biology of the virus broadly remains the same, despite the mutations, the term “variant” may be more scientifically accurate. A variant of a virus means it has slight genetic changes — but not enough to be classified as a new strain. For example, B117 circulating in the UK (and not around the world) is a variant of COVID, meaning it is like the original virus.

What is a virus mutation?

Viruses like SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, are mutating all the time and often this process does not have any impact on the risk the virus poses to humans. New variants of a virus are expected to occur over time.

A **mutation** is simply a **change in the virus’ genome**: the set of genetic instructions that contain all the information that the virus needs to function. These genome changes are detected by what is called genome sequencing.

What is genome sequencing?

A **genome** is an organism’s genetic **material**, and it contains all the instructions needed to build and develop that organism. **Genomic sequencing** is the **process** of figuring out the complete DNA sequence (in SARS-CoV-2 it is the RNA sequence) of an organism’s genome at a single time. It analyses the virus sample taken from a patient and compares it with other cases to understand if the virus has changed.

In the Philippines, genome sequencing and bio surveillance is being done by the University of the Philippines – Philippine Genome Center and the National Institutes of Health.

Are the new COVID-19 variants more deadly?

Preliminary reports from scientists in the UK showed that these variants are more transmissible than previous circulating viruses, with an estimated increase of between 40 percent and 70 percent in transmissibility. However, the US CDC notes that there is no evidence that they cause more severe illness or increased risk of death.

Are current vaccines affected by the new COVID-19 variants?

A publicly shared preprint study published on January 8 found that the N501Y mutation shared by both variants did not alter the activity of antibodies produced by people who received a vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech. AstraZeneca announced that its coronavirus vaccine is currently expected to be effective against the new COVID-19 variants, but more tests were necessary in the UK and South Africa. **Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech both said their vaccines were effective against the two new variants.** But scientists are hopeful that the mutations in the variants will not substantially weaken the performance of vaccines.

Reporting Tips for Journalists

1) Deal carefully with uncertainty when reporting on research findings

Translating the results of SARS-CoV-2 genome sequences published in research papers into informative stories can be challenging, especially when there is uncertainty over the behaviour of the virus caused by the new mutations. A misleading interpretation could cause public panic.

It is important to decide which information you must include to give credibility to your article and what findings you can summarize without losing their accuracy. Always to explain percentage increases in real world terms, like what does it mean to be 40 percent more transmissible?

When you come across research findings, ask yourself these 3 questions:

- How much certainty is there over the results?
- How does it compare to the wider body of evidence?
- To what degree are scientists sure about the findings?

2) Bring the story to life after you've extracted key information from the research papers

- Ask someone working in the same field to comment on the findings. This is especially important for papers that are making big claims. Remember that you can get ideas for commenters in the introduction and discussion of the paper.
- You may listen to interviews of researchers/scientists and experts in the field via online to compare and consult findings.
- Is it clear who are the audience of this work would be?
- Are there people who could be negatively affected? Considering this will allow you to connect more effectively with your audience.
- Remember to consider your audience and outlet. How can you tailor the story to them?

3) Encourage dialogue between researchers/scientists

Bringing out the personal side of research can make your story more interesting. Ask the scientists about their own experience of doing the research. Perhaps they were frustrated for years before making this discovery or have tales to tell of being filled with wonder when they looked at their results. You may also seek sources who also have the understanding on context in Mindanao and shed light on the issues that might be related to it.

4) Remind your audiences that preventive measures still apply

With new variants being discovered, it is a good practice to emphasize this basic reminder on reports.