



COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Afghanistan: Credit: WHO/Zakarya Safari

7 September 2023, Cairo, Egypt – WHO recently designated the Omicron EG.5 lineage as a “variant of interest” and listed other closely monitored variants. It serves as a stark reminder that COVID-19 poses an enduring threat to public health.

Within the Region, 4 countries that share COVID-19-specific reports have detected the EG.5 variant. Other countries have begun to integrate COVID-19 reporting as part of respiratory disease surveillance systems. Vigilance in monitoring the situation remains paramount while this process takes place to transition COVID-19 surveillance from an emergency response to long-term disease prevention, control and management.

The public health risk posed by EG.5 is currently deemed low. The variant has, however, shown increased prevalence, a growth advantage and the ability to evade the immune response. It therefore has the potential to become the dominant variant in the near future.

### **Consistent and comprehensive action must continue**

WHO continues to emphasize the need for enhanced surveillance, sequencing and the comprehensive reporting of SARS-CoV-2 variants, along with clinical management, as the virus continues to evolve.

To effectively combat COVID-19 and prevent further mutations, countries are urged to:

reinforce early warning systems

ensure robust surveillance

vigilantly track variants

provide timely clinical care

administer vaccine boosters to high-risk populations

improve ventilation systems

communicate public health risks.

WHO's general recommendations for respiratory hygiene remain consistent. Get vaccinated in line with WHO guidance on vaccination. Stay at least 1 metre apart from others and avoid crowds. When physical distancing is not possible and in poorly ventilated settings, wear a properly fitted mask. Continue to clean hands often, using alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.

WHO and its Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Vaccine Composition regularly assess the impact of variants on how COVID-19 vaccines perform. This work guides decisions on vaccine updates.

Current advice is for all adult populations to have 2 doses of the primary vaccine series, followed by one booster after an interval of 6 to 12 months. The second booster (fourth dose), after an interval of 4 to 6 months, is recommended for older individuals, immunocompromised individuals, adults with underlying health conditions, pregnant women, and health care workers. This is the advice of the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization, which advises on vaccine administration.

### **New standing recommendations in effect**

WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has issued [standing recommendations under the International Health Regulations \(IHR 2005\) for the long-term management of COVID-19](#)

. These offer guidance to countries in preparing for and responding to the ongoing situation. The standing recommendations remain in effect for all States Parties until 30 April 2025.

WHO urgently calls upon all countries to implement the standing recommendations. Countries will find them of pivotal support as they address COVID-19 risks during the transition from a public health emergency of international concern to managing the virus within broader disease prevention and control programmes.

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