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Health

UK variant has mutated again, scientists say

By Michelle Roberts

Health editor, BBC News online

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The Kent variant of coronavirus that has been spreading around the UK appears to be undergoing some worrying new genetic changes, say scientists.

Tests on some samples show a mutation, called E484K, already seen in the South Africa and Brazil variants that are of concern.

Although this change may reduce vaccine effectiveness, the current ones in use should still work, say experts.

The UK has already stepped up measures to control the spread of new variants.

Urgent testing for the South Africa variant is starting in parts of England and travel restrictions have been introduced to stop more cases entering from abroad.

Experts working with Public Health England have only found a handful of cases of the UK variant with the E484K mutation - it was seen in 11 out of 214,159 samples that they tested.

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It's not unexpected that variants are appearing or that they will continue to change - all viruses mutate as they make new copies of themselves to spread and thrive.

Dr Julian Tang, a virus expert at the University of Leicester, described the finding as "a worrying development, though not entirely unexpected".

He said it was important people follow the lockdown rules and get cases of coronavirus down to prevent opportunities for the virus to mutate further.

"Otherwise not only can the virus continue to spread, it can also evolve."

He said that allowing spread could allow a "melting pot" for different emerging variants.

Scientists have already been checking what these new mutations might mean for existing coronavirus vaccines that were designed around earlier versions of the virus that started the pandemic.

Some **research** appears to show E484K may help the virus evade parts of the immune system called antibodies.

But **early results from Moderna** suggest its vaccine is still effective against variants with this mutation - although the body's immune response may not be as strong or prolonged.

Two new coronavirus vaccines that could be approved soon - one from **Novavax** and another from **Janssen** - appear to offer some protection too.

Even in the worst case scenario, vaccines can be redesigned and tweaked to be a better match in a matter of weeks or months, if necessary, say experts.

A silver lining may be that the variants are mutating in a similar way rather than diverging from each other.

Prof Ravi Gupta from the University of Cambridge said: "This gives us a sign that it has certain favoured routes - and we can work to block those off with a vaccine."

Former UK health secretary Jeremy Hunt said the race was on to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible in order to keep a step ahead of the virus.

Measures such as washing your hands, keeping your distance from other people and wearing a face covering will still help prevent infections.

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