



COVID-19 Alpha Variant (B.1.1.7)

December 2020

Background

A new variant of COVID-19 was recently identified in the UK. This variant began as a cluster of approximately 1100 cases predominantly in the south east of England (later Wales and Scotland). It was first detected in September of 2020 and as of December accounted for an increasing percentage of cases identified in the initial cluster area (as high as 20% of reported cases in one region). With no data to suggest it had come from abroad, scientists believe this variant is likely to have evolved in the UK¹. The new variant is believed to spread more easily than the 'original version', with some reports indicating up to 70% more quickly. However, epidemiological data and modeling do not suggest that it is more deadly. Moreover, there is no evidence that suggests that effectiveness of the vaccines now being deployed will be negatively impacted by this new variant. That said, it is an alarming trend to consider an even more contagious form of COVID-19 particularly given that our health system is already taxed by the 'original' virus with relatively high hospitalization and acute/critical care patients.

While flights to and from the UK have been suspended (and remain so into January 2021) several cases of this new variant have been identified across Canada, including one to date in a resident of Island Health who recently travelled home from the UK.

With news of this new variant it is even more imperative that people follow public health guidelines that include physical distancing, wearing masks, good and frequent hand hygiene, staying home if unwell, avoiding socializing in groups and ensuring people seek a COVID-19 test when appropriate. For nurses and other health care workers, it will be imperative to ensure that ongoing and continued access to personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as tools to mitigate the persistent stresses of staffing challenges remain at the forefront of the system-wide management of COVID-19, including this new variant.

Nurses continue to be at the point of care for COVID-19, not only treating the sick but as members of public health teams, as part of immunization clinics, working 811 and do so while continuing to maintain the public trust by providing safe, competent, ethical and evidence-based care. NNPBC continues to support the thoughtful and evidence-based approach that has been used in this province to address the evolving COVID-19 pandemic conditions, and is proud of the key contributions that nurses make to the collective public health and health care effort. As this and other potential variants evolve, it will be imperative to continue to support nurses' safety and mental health. Additionally, it will continue to be important that nurses utilize the privilege of public trust by continuing to educate patients/clients on the importance of following public health measures/directives.

Key Messages

- A new variant of COVID-19 initially detected in the UK is now confirmed in Canada, and more specifically, in British Columbia.
- This new variant appears to spread more easily however it does not appear to be more deadly.
- While additional study will be required, this new variant is likely to respond well to the COVID-19 vaccines that are being rolled out across BC, Canada and worldwide.
- This new variant of COVID-19 underscores the importance of following public health guidelines which include, physical distancing, no socializing outside of immediate households, the use of masks, good hand hygiene, staying home if unwell and ensuring that those with symptoms isolate and are tested.
- Nurses continue to provide care during this pandemic while also enduring the personal and professional stresses of a system that is strained as well as personal worry and fear about illness.



- While there is no substantiated evidence to the contrary, it is worth noting that nurses, and in fact all health care providers, must continue to have access to proper and full PPE as needed.
- Nurses, who frequently work under-staffed and who are carrying an enormous burden of care during BC's dual public health emergencies, must be provided with access to tools that support mental health and resilience.
- Nurses are in a privileged position of holding the public's trust. It is imperative that nurses utilize this privilege to provide responsible and clear information to their patients/clients about the importance of ensuring adherence to public health measures and directives.

Further Reading/Resources

- [BC Government: Joint statement on first COVID-19 U.K. variant case in B.C.](#)
- [BCCDC Testing for COVID-19](#)
- [BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#)
- [CTV News- What we know about the U.K.'s new novel coronavirus variant](#)
- [NNPBC Issues Summary: Nursing Resiliency During COVID-19](#)
- [Resources to Support Nurses' Mental Health During COVID-19](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

¹ British Medical Journal. "Covid-19: New coronavirus variant is identified in UK". [https://www.bmjjournals.org/doi/10.1136/bmjjm-211485](https://www.bmjjournals.org/doi/10.1136/bmjjm-2021-211485)