

COVID-19 Workplace Information on Variants of Concern

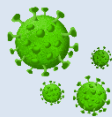
What are variants of concern?

In 2019, a new coronavirus emerged that causes the illness we know as COVID-19. Viruses are constantly changing. Change occurs when the virus is replicating (making copies of itself), and its genes make "copying errors." Many of these changes or mutations have little effect. However, when a mutated virus is shown to increase how quickly the virus spreads, or cause severe illness, they are called "variants of concern." The variants of concern (VOC) listed below are more contagious than the original virus.

What does this mean?

When the virus is more contagious, it can spread easily from person-to-person, increasing the number of COVID-19 cases, and putting a strain on our healthcare resources. Some VOCs may also re-infect people who have recovered from COVID-19, or cause severe illness. Studies to determine if currently approved vaccines are effective in preventing disease from the new variants are ongoing. The vaccines currently approved for use in Canada can still provide protection against variants

Three VOCs are known to be circulating in Ontario:



B.1.1.7

First Detected: Sept 2020
In United Kingdom

Concerns:

It is 50% more contagious and has spread around the world. Potential for more serious illness.

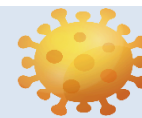


B.1.351

First Detected: Oct 2020
In South Africa

Concerns:

It is 50% more contagious, with increased risk of reinfection if previously infected with another strain.



P.1

First Detected: Dec 2020
In Brazil/Japan

Concerns:

Appears to spread more easily, and there is a risk of re-infection.

Prevention measures

With the increased risk due to VOCs, intensive efforts are more important than ever to prevent further spread of illness in the workplace.

Physical distancing is the most effective way to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. However, in some workplace settings, this may not always be possible. It is important to also have other prevention measures such as:

- Wearing a mask properly (i.e. covering the nose, mouth and chin).
- Wearing eye protection (e.g. goggles, face shield), especially when physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- Actively screening staff and clients for symptoms and possible exposures to persons with COVID-19 before entry into the store/business.
- Supporting staff to stay home if they are sick or are a close contact of someone who has symptoms of or has been diagnosed with COVID-19
- Frequent cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces.
- Improving ventilation, if possible, and ensuring Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems are maintained properly.
- Providing handwashing supplies to promote good hand hygiene.
- Maintaining and updating workplace safety plans, as needed.
- Encouraging vaccination against COVID-19 when it becomes available.

Managing COVID-19 in the workplace

Employers must immediately notify Toronto Public Health (TPH) as soon as they become aware of two or more people who test positive for COVID-19 within a 14-day interval in connection with their workplace premises. Toronto Public Health interviews each person with COVID-19 as soon as possible to ensure they are self-isolating, and will help to identify people who may have been exposed while they were contagious (close contacts). Since VOCs are more easily spread between people, TPH's assessment of workplace close contacts will consider factors such as duration of exposure, use of personal protective equipment, physical distancing, and ventilation.

Testing for VOCs

Current COVID-19 testing in Ontario can detect VOCs although the results take longer. It is not necessary for individuals with COVID-19 or employers to request VOC screening. Information about testing and self-isolation requirements is available [here](#).

Resources

- Toronto Public Health: [Guidance for Employers on Preventing COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)
- Toronto Public Health: [COVID-19: Reopening Guidelines for Businesses & Community Organizations](#)
- Toronto Public Health: [Reporting Workplace Outbreaks to Toronto Public Health](#)
- Toronto Public Health: [COVID-19 Workplace Reporting Tool](#)
- Toronto Public Health: [COVID-19 Safety Plan Checklist](#)
- Toronto Public Health: [Workplace Checklists](#)
- Toronto Public Health: [Guidance for Employers on Managing COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)

For more information, please check toronto.ca/COVID19 regularly.

References

Public Health Ontario. February 7, 2021. *COVID-19 B.1.351 VOC. What We Know So Far*. Available at: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/covid-wwksf/2021/02/wwksf-covid-19-b1351501yv2-variant-of-concern.pdf?la=en>

Public Health Ontario. February 3, 2021. *COVID-19 P.1 VOC. What We Know So Far*. Available at: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/covid-wwksf/2021/02/wwksf-covid-19-p1-variant-of-concern.pdf?la=en>

Public Health Ontario. December 29, 2020. *COVID-19 UK Variant VOC. What We Know So Far*. Available at: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/covid-wwksf/2020/12/what-we-know-uk-variant.pdf?la=en>

Ontario Ministry of Health. Version 2.0 February 12, 2021. *COVID-19 Variant of Concern: Case, Contact and Outbreak Management Interim Guidance*. Available at: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/VOC_guidance.pdf