

More European countries find Omicron cases as concern grows

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People wait in front of a desk for quarantine and COVID-19 test appointments inside Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, the Netherlands [Eva Plevier/Reuters]

London, November 28 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom, Germany and Italy have become the latest countries to detect cases of the new Omicron coronavirus variant, while more nations imposed restrictions on travel from countries in southern Africa despite their protestations and against the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Omicron, designated a “variant of concern” by the United Nations’ health agency, is potentially more contagious than previous variants, although experts do not know yet if it will cause more or less severe COVID-19 compared with other strains.

The two Omicron cases found in the UK on Saturday were connected to travel to southern Africa, British Health Minister Sajid Javid said.

Speaking later, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson outlined measures that included stricter testing rules for people arriving in the country but which stopped short of curbs on social activity other than requiring mask wearing in some settings.

“We will require anyone who enters the UK to take a PCR test by the end of the second day after their arrival and to self-isolate until they have a negative result,” Johnson told a news conference.

People who had come into contact with people testing positive for a suspected case of Omicron would have to self-isolate for 10 days and the government would tighten up the rules on wearing face coverings, Johnson said, adding the steps would be reviewed in three weeks.

The health ministry in the German state of Bavaria also announced two confirmed cases of the variant. The two people entered Germany at Munich airport on November 24, before Germany designated South Africa as a virus-variant area, and were now isolating, the ministry said, indicating without stating explicitly that the people had travelled from South Africa.

In Italy, the National Health Institute said a case of the new variant had been detected in Milan in a person coming from Mozambique.

Czech health authorities also said they were examining a suspected case of the variant in a person who spent time in Namibia.

Dutch health authorities, meanwhile, said Omicron was “probably” among some of the 61 passengers who tested positive after arriving on two flights from South Africa.

England’s Chief Medical Officer, Chris Witty, said at the same news conference as Johnson that there was still much uncertainty about Omicron, but “there is a reasonable chance that at least there will be some degree of vaccine escape with this variant.”

Oksana Pyzik, of the University College London School of Pharmacy, told Al Jazeera that it will take weeks of analysis for scientists to determine the severity of symptoms caused by Omicron. “This variant was discovered very early, which is great but the tradeoff on that is that it will take some time for further understanding,” Pyzik said.

“If anything we’ve learned throughout the pandemic so far is that acting early is key, so if there has been a false alarm on this, it gave countries enough time to prepare for a worst outcome scenario – which, if we go back to March 2020, many countries did not.”

The variant, which has several mutations that may carry the risk of reinfection, was first discovered by scientists in South Africa and has also since been detected in Belgium, Botswana, Israel and Hong Kong.

The WHO has cautioned that it could take several weeks to find out whether the newly discovered mutations made the virus more virulent or transmissible. And although epidemiologists say travel curbs may be too late to stop Omicron from circulating globally, many countries around the world – including the United States, Brazil, Canada and European Union nations – announced travel bans or restrictions on southern Africa on Friday.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and State Department added on Saturday to Washington's previously announced travel restrictions, advising against travel to eight southern African countries.

Also on Saturday, Australia said it would ban non-citizens who have been in nine southern African countries from entering and will require supervised 14-day quarantines for Australian citizens returning from there.

The UK said it was expanding its "red list" to put travel curbs on more southern African countries, while South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Oman, Kuwait and Hungary announced travel restrictions on southern African nations.

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