

# *U.S. health specialist says Omicron appears to not be so potent*

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Washington, December 7 (RHC)-- Early indications of the severity of the Omicron COVID-19 variant are “a bit encouraging” -- but more information is still needed, according to leading U.S. pandemic adviser Dr Anthony Fauci.

“Omicron has a transmission advantage” in South Africa, where the variant was first reported, Fauci said on Sunday in a CNN interview, noting the country had a low level of cases before it saw “almost a vertical spike upwards, which is almost exclusively Omicron.”

“Though it’s too early to really make any definitive statements about it, thus far, it does not look like there’s a great degree of severity to it,” he said. “Thus far, the signals are a bit encouraging.”

Medical experts have in recent days underscored that the South African population skews young and more severe cases could emerge in the coming weeks. Lab tests are under way to determine whether Omicron – a heavily mutated strain of the virus – is more transmissible than other strains, resistant to immunity from vaccination and infection or more severe, with results expected within weeks.

Meanwhile, U.S. health officials said the variant has spread to about one-third of U.S. states, but the Delta version remains the majority of COVID-19 cases nationwide. At least 15 US states have reported Omicron cases: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin, according to a tally by the Reuters news agency.

Many of the cases were among fully vaccinated individuals with mild symptoms, although the booster shot status of some patients was not known. “I think that there’s a real risk that we’re going to see a decrease in effectiveness of the vaccines,” Stephen Hoge, president of vaccine producer Moderna, told ABC News.

“What I don’t know is how substantial that is,” Hoge added. “Is it going to be the kind of thing that we saw with the Delta variant, which is, ultimately vaccines were still effective, or are we going to see something like a 50 percent decrease in efficacy, which would mean we need to reboot the vaccines.”

Moderna, like other pharmaceutical companies, including Pfizer, has already started work to adapt their vaccines if necessary. Cases of the Omicron variant have so far been confirmed in some 40 countries.

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