

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**31 additional Omicron variant cases identified in Louisiana**

LDH anticipates dramatic increase over next few weeks

Baton Rouge, La. (December 17, 2021) — The Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) is reporting 31 additional cases of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. None of these new cases have required hospitalization.

This brings the total number of Omicron cases in our state to 124. The first confirmed Omicron case in Louisiana was identified on December 3. The following is a total breakdown of cases by region:

- Region 1 (Greater New Orleans Area): 94 - 56 probable; 38 confirmed
- Region 2 (Baton Rouge Area): 14- 11 probable; 3 confirmed
- Region 3 (South Central): 1 confirmed
- Region 4 (Acadiana): 3- 2 probable; 1 confirmed
- Region 5 (Southwest): 1 probable
- Region 6 (Central): 1 probable
- Region 7 (Northwest): 6 - 1 probable; 5 confirmed
- Region 9 (Northshore): 4 - 2 probable; 2 confirmed

Not all cases of Omicron can be identified, which means that there are many more cases of Omicron occurring in Louisiana than are reflected in our case counts. Within our state, Omicron outbreaks have been identified in universities, and cases have been identified in high-risk settings such as K-12 schools and nursing homes.

CDC estimates that the proportion of Omicron among circulating variants is currently 2.9% nationwide. Louisiana estimates that the proportion of Omicron among LA variants is 4.3% for the week ending December 4 (please note that these data are preliminary as more sequences for that time period will continue to be uploaded). We expect transmission of Omicron will increase.

"We feel very confident in saying that Omicron is now circulating throughout our state, and that the proportion of cases attributable to Omicron is likely to increase dramatically over the next few weeks," said State Epidemiologist Theresa Sokol.

Case-based surveillance for Omicron is no longer sustainable due to the volume of cases being identified. In addition, providing case counts of confirmed and probable cases will provide an inaccurate representation of the amount of Omicron circulating in our state. This is because: 1) probable cases are only able to be identified by one specific PCR assay that picks up the S-gene dropout, 2) not all PCR samples are submitted for sequencing, and 3) many people are tested by rapid antigen or molecular tests, which are not able to be sequenced.

Because of this, starting next Wednesday LDH will move to weekly variant proportion reporting.

LDH Guidance

The following prevention tools are especially important as we continue to monitor the Omicron variant in Louisiana:

- Vaccines remain the best public health measure to protect people from COVID-19, slow transmission and reduce the likelihood of new variants emerging. COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalizations and death. Emerging data demonstrate that booster doses are particularly important for preventing infection with Omicron.
- Masks offer protection against all variants.
- Testing for COVID-19 prior to travel or gathering with individuals outside one's immediate household is also important for preventing transmission and protecting loved ones this holiday season.

Earlier this week, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) released data that confirms that our existing vaccines work against Omicron, especially if you are boosted. Not being vaccinated leaves individuals unprotected. Unvaccinated people are 14 times more likely to die and 8 times more likely to be hospitalized due to COVID compared to a fully vaccinated person.

CDC and LDH strongly recommend everyone aged 5 and older receive the COVID-19 vaccine and, if eligible, receive the booster shot. COVID-19 vaccines are widely available at more than 1,000 locations in all of Louisiana's 64 parishes, including at pharmacies, hospitals, health care clinics and doctor's offices.

For a list of locations near you, visit <https://ldh.la.gov/covidvaccine> or text your ZIP code to GETVAX (438829) in English or VACUNA (822862) in Spanish. If you have questions, would like to speak with a medical professional or need help scheduling an appointment, call 211 or Louisiana's vaccine hotline at 1-855-453-0774.

Omicron Background

On November 26, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified a new variant, B.1.1.529, as a Variant of Concern and named it Omicron. This new variant was first reported to the WHO by government officials in South Africa. Since then, it has been detected in 77 countries and more than 38 states.

Omicron includes multiple mutations across the SARS-CoV-2 genome and is more transmissible than previous strains. More information can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/omicron-variant.html>

LDH established numerous laboratories to conduct genomic sequencing on positive SARS-CoV-2 specimens in order to track circulating SARS-CoV-2 lineages, including newly emerging variants such as Omicron. Epidemiologists, laboratorians and researchers will continue to closely monitor these data to continue identifying Omicron cases in Louisiana.

About the Louisiana Department of Health

The Louisiana Department of Health strives to protect and promote health statewide and to ensure access to medical, preventive and rehabilitative services for all state residents. The Louisiana Department of Health includes the Office of Public Health, Office of Aging & Adult Services, Office of Behavioral Health, Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities, and Healthy Louisiana (Medicaid). To learn more, visit www.ldh.la.gov or follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or our [blog](#).

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