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Delta strain 8 times less sensitive to COVID-19 vaccine antibodies – study

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NEW DELHI, India (Xinhua/ AFP) — A study conducted on 100 healthcare workers across three centers in India has found the Delta variant eight times less sensitive to antibodies generated by the COVID-19 vaccine, a local media report said Monday.

The study, named "Sars-Cov-2 B.1.617.2 Deltavariant Emergence and Vaccine Breakthrough: Collaborative Study", also found that the variant has a much higher capacity to infect more people.

The collaborative study from India was conducted along with scientists from the Cambridge Institute of Therapeutic Immunology and Infectious Disease.

"The B.1.617.2 Delta variant not only dominates vaccine-breakthrough infections with higher respiratory viral loads compared to non-delta infections but also generates greater transmission between fully vaccinated healthcare workers, as compared to other variants B.1.1.7 (Alpha variant) or B.1.617.1 (Kappa variant)," the findings of the study revealed.

The study said the Delta variant is less sensitive to neutralizing antibodies from recovered individuals, with "higher replication efficiency" as compared to the Alpha variant.

Pfizer/BioNTech vs Delta

Rising coronavirus cases in Israel, where most residents are inoculated with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, offer "a preliminary signal" the vaccine may be less effective in preventing mild illness from the Delta variant, a top expert said Monday.

But Ran Balicer, chairman of Israel's national expert panel on COVID-19, stressed it was "too early to precisely assess vaccine effectiveness against the variant" that is surging across the globe.

That is partly due to the overall low number of cases among fully vaccinated Israelis, and because exposure to the virus and the likelihood of being tested are not evenly distributed across the population, further complicating efforts to reach conclusions about the data.

Balicer, also the chief innovation officer at Clalit, Israel's largest health maintenance organization (HMO), told AFP that the Delta variant's emergence as the "dominant strain" in the country has led to a "massive shift in the transmission dynamic."

Israel's vaccine rollout that began in December was one of the world's fastest, making the Jewish state a closely-watched case study on whether mass inoculation offers a path out of the pandemic. Vaccinations had brought transmission down to about five local new cases per day, but that figure has risen to around 300 in recent days, with the Delta variant raging.

About half of the daily cases are among children, and half are among mostly vaccinated adults.

"To some extent that could be expected since 85 percent of Israeli adults are vaccinated," Balicer said.

"But the rates in which we see these breakthrough cases make some believe they extend beyond that expected point and suggest some decrease in vaccine effectiveness against mild illness – but not severe illness – is likely."

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned Sunday, ahead of a weekly cabinet meeting, that "with the Delta variant running amok," Israel may have to reintroduce certain restrictions that were lifted last month to curb transmission.