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WHO: Omicron BA.2 likely to have same severity as original

Subvariant already becoming dominant in Philippines, Denmark, Nepal, Qatar and India

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The emerging BA.2 form of the Omicron Covid-19 variant does not seem to be any more severe than the original BA.1 form, an official of the World Health Organisation said yesterday.



Vaccines also continue to provide similar protection against the different forms of Omicron, Dr Boris Pavlin of the WHO's Covid-19 Response Team told an online briefing.

The comments come as the BA.2 subvariant begins to replace Omicron's more common "original" BA.1 subvariant in countries such as Denmark.

Based on data from Denmark, the first country where BA.2 overtook BA.1, there appears to be no difference in disease severity, although BA.2 has the potential to replace BA.1 globally, Pavlin added.

Rapidly replacing BA.1

BA.2 is more transmissible than the more common BA.1 and more able to infect vaccinated people, according to a Danish study which analysed coronavirus infections in more than 8,500 Danish households between December and January.

The subvariant is already becoming dominant in the Philippines, Nepal, Qatar, India and Denmark, Pavlin said. He added: "Vaccination is profoundly protective against severe disease, including for Omicron. BA.2 is rapidly replacing BA.1. Its impact is unlikely to be substantial.

Meanwhile, new studies are emerging that suggest BA.2 variant is transmitting even faster than the original.

The findings cast doubt on hopes that the wave of Omicron that's sweeping the world may help hasten the end of the pandemic. Calls for governments to treat Covid-19 as endemic like influenza are rising globally.

The production of neutralising antibodies during an Omicron infection appears related to the severity of the illness, according to one report from researchers at the University of California, San Francisco. The milder form of most Omicron cases in vaccinated people may leave those who recover from them still vulnerable to existing virus and future variants that emerge, the researchers said.

More contagious

The second study found a second-generation form of Omicron appears even more transmissible than the original. It showed 39 per cent of people infected with a the BA.2 subvariant were likely to infect others in their households, compared with 29 per cent of those who were carrying the original version.