

- COVID-19 / Hepatitis / Virus

Omicron and kids' hepatitis may be linked

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Infection with the omicron variant of the coronavirus may have a role in recent cases of severe acute hepatitis in children, according to new research presented at a health ministry panel meeting Wednesday.

Kyoto University professor Hiroshi Nishiura told the ministry's coronavirus advisory board that countries with a large number of omicron infections such as Britain and the United States were also found to have reported a relatively higher number of childhood hepatitis cases.

According to the World Health Organization, 348 probable cases of unexplained hepatitis in children have been confirmed worldwide. Japan's health ministry has identified seven domestic cases so far, while the U.S is currently investigating 109 child hepatitis cases of unknown origin, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Adenovirus, a common virus that can cause a range of illnesses including gastroenteritis (stomach flu), has been suspected as a possible cause of the severe liver disease. In Britain, which has reported 163 cases so far, 126 cases have been tested for adenovirus. Among them, adenovirus was detected in 72%, or 91 cases, according to the U.K. Health Security Agency. The agency says that over 75% of the children are age 5 or younger. Patient symptoms correspond with the World Health Organization's working definition of a "probable case" of the acute, severe hepatitis. Reported symptoms include abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, jaundice and elevated liver enzyme levels. Such probable cases are defined as hospitalized patients who have seen spikes in their liver enzyme levels, but for which hepatitis viruses A, B, C, D and E have all been ruled out as the cause.