6 Questions (and Answers) About COVID-19 Variants

What is a virus variant?

A virus variant is a different version of a virus. Most viruses mutate or change as they replicate (make copies of themselves), and this leads to variants. Small differences in SARS-CoV-2 variants have been identified and studied since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virus variants can be passed from one person to another. COVID-19 vaccines protect people against severe illness, including disease caused by Delta and other variants circulating in the U.S.

Why do new COVID-19 variants keep emerging?

It is normal for a virus like SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, to evolve into new variants. Doctors and scientists expect to see new virus variants, because viruses are always changing. For example, seasonal influenza (flu) vaccines are updated from one season to the next to protect against the newest variants of influenza viruses. Just as it's important to get a flu shot, getting a COVID-19 vaccine is still the best protection against infection and severe illness from SARS-CoV-2.

Why are scientists watching COVID-19 variants?

Scientists follow SARS-CoV-2 variants closely because they may:

- Spread more easily between people
- Be more resistant to COVID-19 treatments or vaccines
- Make people sicker

Scientists are watching many different SARS-CoV-2 variants, including well-known variants like Delta, Gamma, and Lambda. This research expands as new variants are found.

Do the current vaccines work against variants?

So far, studies suggest that the current vaccines protect you from getting seriously ill from the virus variants that are currently spreading. However, that could change as the viruses change. Scientists keep studying variants to make sure people stay protected.

COVID-19 vaccines protect people from getting infected and severely ill, and they significantly reduce the likelihood of hospitalization and death. The best way to slow the spread of COVID-19 and to prevent infection by Delta or other variants is to get vaccinated. The more the virus spreads, the more chances it has to change.

What can I do to stay safe from COVID-19 variants?

Get vaccinated. Even if you've already had COVID-19, vaccines are the best way to prevent infection by Delta or other variants.

In addition, follow CDC guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

How do I know if I have a COVID-19 variant?

If you test positive for SARS-CoV-2, you and your doctor may not be able to find out which specific virus variant you have. No matter what version of the virus you have, if you test positive, it is important to take care of yourself, get medical care, and take precautions to avoid spreading the virus to anyone else.

Learn more about COVID-19 prevention and treatment at https://covid19community.nih.gov/.