



**GOVERNMENT OF
THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES**

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

ST. CROIX OFFICE
3500 ESTATE RICHMOND
CHRISTIANSTED, ST. CROIX, U.S.V.I. 00820-4370
MEMORIAL COMPLEX
TEL: (340)718-6551 * FAX: (340)718-1376

ST. THOMAS OFFICE
1303 HOSPITAL GROUND, SUITE 10
CHARLOTTE AMALIE
ST. THOMAS, U.S.V.I. 00802-6722
TEL: (340)774-0117 * FAX: (340)777-4001

PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar
(340) 774-0117 x5618

Department of Health Monitors New COVID-19 Variants Affecting the Mainland United States

St. Croix, US Virgin Islands—The Virgin Islands Department of Health is actively monitoring new COVID-19 variants that are being detected around the globe. Like many viruses, the SARS-CoV-2 virus has evolved over time. Viruses go through mutations as time goes on and these mutations are called strains or variants. In the past year there have been thousands of documented mutations of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The latest variant is thought to be 50% more contagious than the strain that originated in Wuhan, China, a year ago.

As the virus circulates in the community, small changes in their genetic makeup happen in an attempt to remain infectious and viable. These mutations have continuously occurred since the beginning of the emergence of the infection. Most mutations in the SARS-CoV-2 virus have no impact on the function of the virus. However, some mutations will lead to higher rates and possibly re-infections. The COVID-19 vaccines are effective against all of the mutated strains of the SARS-CoV-2 that have been sequenced since they produce widely neutralizing antibodies.

B117 is one of those variant strains that has hit parts of the United Kingdom. Scientists suspect that the new mutant variant has affected most of the United States and the V.I. Department of Health is bracing for it possibly arriving to the territory.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, here's what scientists are working to understand more:

- How widely these new variants have spread
- How the new variants differ
- How the disease caused by these new variants differs from the disease caused by other variants that are currently circulating

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To control the spread, scientists want to better understand how the new variants:

- Spread more easily from person to person
- Cause milder or more severe disease in people
- Are detected by currently available viral tests
- Respond to medicines currently being used to treat people for COVID-19
- Change the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. There is no evidence that this is occurring, and most experts believe this is unlikely to occur because of the nature of the immune response to the virus.

There are no confirmed cases of any new variants of SARS-CoV-2 in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The news of new variants popping up in the mainland U.S. comes amid the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccination plan and possibly threatens the goal of herd immunity. This reinforces the need for mass vaccination and for basic precautionary measures to be maintained. Strong mitigation for prevention of transmission needs to be continued to prevent the emergence of additional variants. This includes vaccinations, mask-wearing, social distancing, and frequent hand and environmental sanitization.