

Technical Brief: Viral Variant VOC-202012/01 (23 December 2020)

Key messages

- A new variant of SAR-COV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19, has been identified and is circulating in the UK, with small numbers also being found overseas.
- The variant was called a VUI (Variant Under Investigation) when it was first identified, but it is now called a VOC (Variant of Concern). Its name refers to its status (VOC), year (2020), month (12) and number of variants investigated in that month (01).
- The new variant can only be confirmed by sequencing the full RNA of a sample, which is only done for a proportion of tests. 3,000 sequences of the new variant have now been completed, of which 49 were in Wales. However, several labs in the UK use a test which can infer when a positive test is a new variant, due to a blank area in the test results associated with the mutation.
- Transmission is increased in the new variant (high confidence)
- There is currently no evidence that the variant is different in severity, or differs by characteristics of sex and ethnicity. The SAGE subgroup NERVTAG stated that there are currently insufficient data to draw any conclusion on the age distribution of cases and the European Centre for Disease Control threat assessment from 20 December says the cases with the VOC-202012/01 variant are predominantly currently identified in people younger than 60 years.
- It is not clear if immunity to SARS-CoV-2 is affected by the variant. Early analysis in England and Wales has not found an increased frequency of repeat infections for this variant cases when compared to reinfections reported for other contemporaneously circulating variants. Immunity is raised to a number of different viral proteins/parts of viral proteins, so a small number of changes is unlikely to have a large impact on immunity.
- There is an ongoing investigation into the role of children in transmitting this variant.
- There is no evidence that shows that the vaccine will be less effective in people who are infected with this variant (medium confidence).