



UKHSA Health Protection Briefing Note

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Event

Update on COVID-19 variant BA.2.86

Notified by

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IRP Level

National enhanced response

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Instructions for Cascade

- **Regional Deputy Directors** to cascade to Directors of Public Health and Directors Adult and Social Care
- **UKHSA microbiologists** to cascade to non-UKHSA labs (NHS labs and private)
- **UKHSA microbiologists** to cascade to NHS Trust infection leads

Summary:

A new COVID-19 variant, BA.2.86, has been identified in a number of countries including in the UK. The variant is of the Omicron (BA.2) sub lineage with a significant number of mutations and currently we have limited information on its transmissibility, severity, and potential vaccine evasion properties.

On 30th August, a briefing note [BN2023_033](#) was issued with information on the new variant and details of the acceleration of the autumn COVID and flu vaccination campaign in England. This briefing note updates colleagues and stakeholders on the situation with implications and recommendations for UKHSA and the NHS.

Background and Interpretation:

As of 4 September 2023, there were 34 BA.2.86 sequenced cases in England, with cases located in East of England, London, and Northwest England. In these 34 cases, there were 5 hospitalisations and no deaths related to COVID. These cases include 28 sequenced as part of an investigation of an outbreak in a care home which reported a high attack rate. This single care home outbreak investigation is an early indicator that the variant may be sufficiently transmissible to have impact in close contact settings.



UK Health Security Agency

The overall data suggest established community transmission of BA.2.86 within the UK due to the detection of unlinked cases in different regions of the UK, without identified travel and epidemiological links. There is currently no evidence that BA.2.86 has a growth advantage within the UK compared to other circulating variants. In addition, the potential UK population impact after several vaccines and waves cannot be extrapolated from the available data.

The global situation is dynamic with cases reported from new countries daily, as of 11 September, there are 97 BA.2.86 sequences available in GISAID from 14 countries. Wastewater detections have been reported in multiple countries. The global spread of this variant may have been the result of international seeding from one or more unknown sources through mass travel. However, with apparent established transmission chains now in many countries, these seeding events are now unlikely to be the key driver of spread.

UK Variant Technical Group continues to meet to review all the available information and publish updated risk assessments and data. The latest UK data is published here: [Investigation of SARS-CoV-2 variants: technical briefings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/investigation-of-sars-cov-2-variants-technical-briefings)

Autumn flu and COVID-19 vaccination campaign

As a precautionary measure to the emergence of BA.2.86, the UKHSA has advised that the intervention with the greatest potential public health impact is to vaccinate eligible individuals. Following this advice, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has asked NHS England to bring the vaccination programme forward, to start earlier, and to accelerate delivery of the programme to vaccinate eligible people quickly to enable as many people as possible to have been vaccinated by the end of October.

This accelerated vaccination campaign commenced on 11 September 2023, starting with care home resident and staff and those that are housebound.

There is no change to the eligibility criteria for both Autumn 2023/24 COVID-19 cohorts, and flu cohorts. No decision has been made on expanded eligibility for vaccination and this continues to be kept under close review.

[JCVI statement on the COVID-19 vaccination programme for autumn 2023, 26 May 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/jcvi-statement-on-the-covid-19-vaccination-programme-for-autumn-2023)

[National flu immunisation programme 2023 to 2024 letter - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-flu-immunisation-programme-2023-to-2024-letter)

[A guide to the COVID-19 autumn programme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-guide-to-the-covid-19-autumn-programme)

Information and system letters for the NHS and Adult Social care letters can be found here:

[Flu and COVID-19 autumn vaccine programmes \(skillsforcare.org.uk\)](https://skillsforcare.org.uk)

[NHS England » BA2.86 risk and changes to autumn/winter 2023/24 vaccination delivery programme](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/08/nhs-flu-and-covid-vaccine-programmes-brought-forward-due-to-risk-of-new-covid-variant/)

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Current guidance

There is no change to the guidance and advice on COVID-19 treatments, testing, outbreak control management and infection prevention control.



Adherence to the recommended measures remain the best way to protect the most vulnerable groups across healthcare and social care settings. This continues to be kept under assessment and close review.

Updated guidance for immunosuppressed people to reflect the accelerated vaccination programme, has been produced and will be published shortly. This advice otherwise remains the same.

The [guidance for the public](#) and sector specific guidance (including [workplaces](#), [prisons](#) and [adult social care settings](#)) remain current advice and is kept under review.

Implications & Recommendations for UKHSA Regions

Briefings are being planned for a range of stakeholders including ASC Sector leads, ADPH and DsPH, as well as regional Directors of Public health. Regional teams may receive queries and should refer to the published letters and briefings in the first instance.

HPTs should be aware of a request from UKHSA to the NHS reminding them to continue to refer positive COVID PCR tests for sequencing (please see NHS section below)

Implications & Recommendations for UKHSA sites and services

Duty doctors may receive queries about BA 2.86; and should refer to the published letters and briefings in the first instance. Further queries can be forwarded to Incident010.NRC@ukhsa.gov.uk.

Implications & Recommendations for NHS

NHS microbiologists, virologists and all NHS Trusts laboratory managers are requested to continue to refer [eligible positive PCR SARS-CoV-2 positives](#) (i.e. those with one or more gene targets that produce a cycle threshold (CT) <30) to UKHSA laboratories at Birmingham, Manchester and Porton Down for sequencing. Please avoid batching of samples to enable real-time sequencing and subsequent reporting of variants in the UK. This will support the continuing national genomic surveillance for COVID-19 to detect the emergence and potential growth of variants including BA.2.86.

Information can be found in the SARS-CoV-2 Sequencing Service Referral Instructions for your designated UKHSA sequencing laboratory. Please contact the UKHSA Genomics Laboratory Division at genomics@ukhsa.gov.uk if any further information is required.

Implications and recommendations for Local Authorities

Directors of Public Health (DsPH) and Directors of Adult Social Services may receive queries and should refer to the published letters and briefings in the first instance.

References/ Sources of information

Referenced above.



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Security
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