

Study: Omicron less severe, but more resistant to vaccines



Takalane Mulaudzi, 29, grimaces as she gets her COVID-19 vaccination at Soweto's Baragwanath hospital Monday. South Africa health insurer Discovery Health reported yesterday that the omicron variant is more resistant to vaccines but has less severe symptoms. (Jerome Delay / Associated press)

By Lesley Wroughton - The Washington Post

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Omicron appears to cause less severe illness than earlier variants of the coronavirus but is more resistant to the two-dose Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine widely used in South Africa, according to the first major private study since omicron was first detected last month.

The study by Discovery Health, South Africa's largest health insurer, of 211,000

positive coronavirus cases, of which 78,000 were attributed to omicron, showed that risk of hospital admissions among adults who contracted COVID-19 was 29% lower than in the initial pandemic wave that emerged in March 2020.

However, the study found that the vaccine from U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German partner BioNTech provided just 33% protection against infection, much less than the level for other variants detected in the country so far. At the same time, the vaccine provided 70% protection in fully vaccinated individuals against severe complications that would require a patient to be hospitalized, the study found, calling that “very good protection.”

Children appear to have a 20% higher risk of hospital admission with complications during the fourth wave than during the first, despite a very low absolute incidence, the study found.

Symptoms in children generally include a sore throat, nasal congestion and fever for two to three days, with recovery after three days.

Ryan Noach, Discovery’s chief executive, said it was still in the early days for omicron and warned that infections could still overwhelm the health care system as the variant evolves further.

“The omicron-driven fourth wave has a significantly steeper trajectory of a new infections relative to prior waves,” said Noach. “National data show an exponential increase in both new infections and test positivity rates during the first three weeks of this wave, indicating a highly transmissible variant with rapid community spread of infection.

“What is encouraging at this stage is a flatter trajectory of hospital admissions indicating likely lower severity of this wave,” he told a news briefing later.

Noach said anecdotal evidence gathered from doctors treating omicron patients outside hospitals showed a high reinfection rate and multiple breakthrough infections in vaccinated people that emerge after a short incubation period of three to four days.

Most infections are described as mild

with recoveries usually within three days, he said. The most common early

symptom reported is a scratchy throat, followed by nasal congestion, a dry cough and myalgia manifesting in lower back pain.

He said private hospitals reported that most patients were unvaccinated and many were initially admitted for non-COVID-related illnesses. There was less evidence of respiratory infections in omicron-infected patients, compared to the other variants, with fewer patients requiring oxygen, Noach added.

The study comes as omicron has become the dominant variant in South Africa less than three weeks since its existence was confirmed Nov. 25. The World Health Organization warned Monday that omicron, now detected in 63 countries, poses a “very high” global risk.

In a separate briefing, Matshidiso Moeti, Africa’s director for the World Health Organization, declared that Africa was now officially in the fourth wave of the pandemic primarily driven by omicron, with an 83% surge in new cases this week compared to the previous week.

“This is the fastest surge recorded since May last year,” Moeti said. “We are cautiously optimistic as we are seeing fewer deaths during the early weeks of this current wave when compared to previous surges.”

The drop in the protection of two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against any symptomatic infection is similar to what a British preprint study released late last week showed, namely that it dipped below 40%.

The British study, however, could not answer pressing questions about whether vaccine protection against severe disease would erode just as steeply. The South African data provides a first hint, showing that protection against severe illness requiring hospitalization after two doses was diminished from its more than 90% protection against the delta variant but remained relatively robust, at 70%.