

# COVID-19 Variants of Concern

June 23, 2021

## What is a COVID-19 variant of concern?

It is normal for viruses to change over time. Some viruses like influenza change often, while others hardly change over many years. A variant of concern is a virus that has both changed and created some concern because it may spread easier; may make people sicker; may impact vaccine effectiveness or may require different treatments.

## What are the current COVID-19 variants of concern and how are they different?

The first COVID-19 variant of concern seen in Canada was in December 2020. Now most cases of COVID-19 across Canada are caused by variants of concern:

- **ALPHA B.1.1.7** – First discovered in the United Kingdom. Spreads easier. May make you sicker than the regular COVID-19 virus.
- **BETA B.1.351** – First reported in South Africa. Spreads easier.
- **GAMMA P.1** – First reported in Japan but later discovered in Brazil. May be able to re-infect people who have had COVID-19.
- **DELTA B.1.617** – First reported in India. This variant has 3 subvariants called B.1.617.1, B.1.617.2, and B.1.617.3. DELTA B.1.617.2 appears to spread much easier and may cause more serious illness.

## If the virus is always changing should we expect more variants of concern?

We can expect more variants, but not all will be considered variants of concern. Scientists and researchers across the world are always looking for changes in the COVID-19 virus so we can better understand how they affect people.

## **Which COVID-19 variants of concern have been found in Nova Scotia?**

All four COVID-19 variants of concern have been found in Nova Scotia. Cases have been reported among people who got COVID-19 when they traveled outside the province or country, their close contacts, and a small number of people who caught it through community spread.

## **How does the laboratory identify COVID-19 variants of concern?**

Regular COVID-19 testing can only tell if someone has the COVID-19 virus or not. Two other types of tests are used to confirm variants in people who test positive for COVID-19:

1. A screening test for variants of concern (VOC screen)
2. Genomic sequencing, which looks for the specific changes in the viral genes that are associated with a COVID-19 variant of concern

The Nova Scotia laboratory uses both tests to monitor for variants of concern in all patients who test positive for COVID-19.

## **What is Nova Scotia doing about COVID-19 variants of concern?**

Nova Scotia is focused on vaccinating as many Nova Scotians as quickly as possible while slowing the spread of COVID-19 variants of concern by:

- Regular testing of people with and without symptoms to keep looking for the virus including variants of concern
- Laboratory screening of positive COVID-19 tests for variants to allow early detection
- Aggressive case and contact management
- Adjusting public health measures based on epidemiology
- Tracking and reporting known and emerging variants in Nova Scotia

## How do I protect myself and others from COVID-19 variants of concern?

Some of these new variants can spread more easily when an infected person coughs, sneezes, sings, shouts, or talks. COVID-19 vaccines are effective to protect against disease including against variants and are more effective after your second dose of vaccine. Book both your first and second dose as soon as it is time. It is important to follow public health measures and regularly get tested even when vaccinated to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- Wear a non-medical mask
- Frequent handwashing/sanitizing
- Physical distancing
- Follow public health gathering limits
- Stay home and get tested for COVID-19 if you feel even slightly ill
- Continue to avoid crowded spaces and poorly ventilated spaces.