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New COVID Strain Is "Taking Charge," Doctors Warn—What to Know About the XEC Variant

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The new variant is spreading in Europe, and doctors predict it will soon become the dominant COVID strain in the U.S.



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By [Dana Schulz](#)

Sep 17, 2024

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School's back in session, the temperatures are dropping, and, you know what that means—[sniffles, coughs, and fevers](#). To make matters worse, there's a new COVID strain that's "taking charge" and doctors caution that it could

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soon become the dominant variant of the virus, especially as we head into winter.

Known as XEC, the variant was first detected in Germany in June and is now spreading across Europe. It's also shown up in the U.S., though it has not yet met the threshold to be tracked by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "A lineage must be estimated to circulate above 1% nationally over a two-week period for it to be tracked," explains the [Los Angeles Times](#). But experts predict that will soon change.

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Currently, the DeFLuQE variants (KP.3.1.1) are the most widely circulating in the U.S. and were responsible for the alarming late-summer COVID surge across the country. According to the [CDC's variant tracker](#), KP.3.1.1 makes up 52.7 percent of current U.S. COVID cases, followed by KP.2.3 at 12.2 percent.



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However, **Eric Topol**, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in La Jolla and a leading COVID-19 researcher, [wrote in an X post](#) on Sunday: "At this juncture, the XEC variant appears to be the most likely one to get legs next."

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Topol was responding to a [separate X post](#) by data analyst **Mike Honey**, who tracked the spread of the XEC variant across Europe since June. "Strong growth in Denmark and Germany (16-17%), also the UK and Netherlands (11-13%),"

Mike Honey

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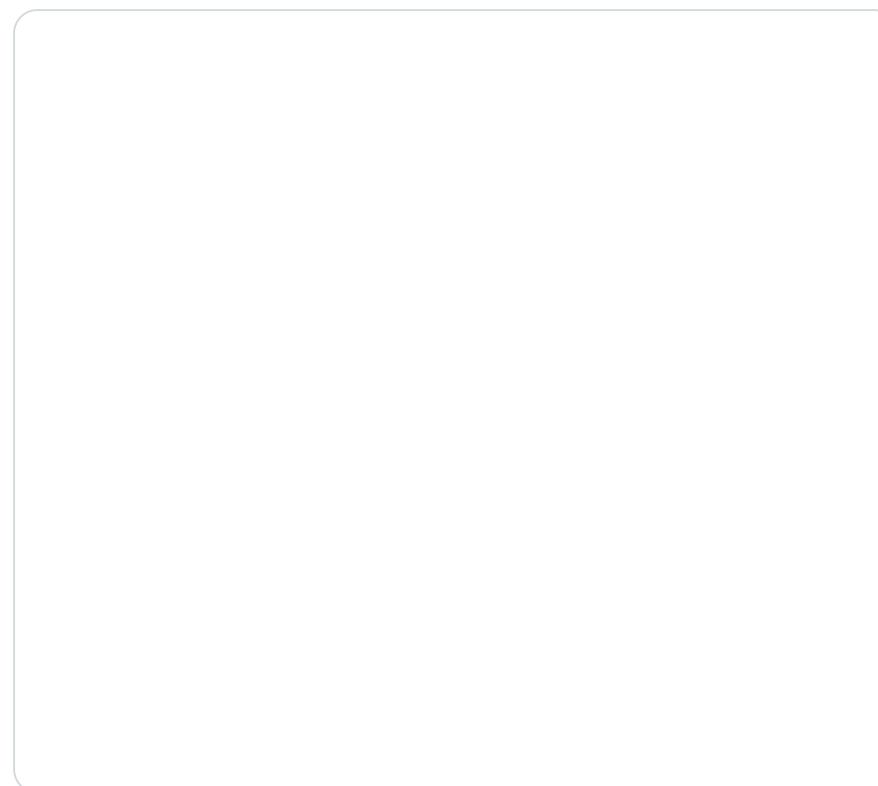
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Recombinant variant XEC is continuing to spread, and looks a likely next challenger against the now-dominant DeFLuQE variants (KP.3.1.1.*).

Here are the leading countries reporting XEC. Strong growth in Denmark and Germany (16-17%), also the UK and Netherlands (11-13%).



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According to the *LA Times*, Topol explained that XEC "is just getting started now around the world and here." He continued, "And that's going to take many weeks, a couple months, before it really takes hold and starts to cause a wave." But he noted, "XEC is definitely taking charge."

Speaking with [*The San Francisco Chronicle*](#), **Peter Chin-Hong**, an infectious disease specialist at the University of California San Francisco, explained that XEC's tighter binding cells could make it especially transmissible.

"With these new transmissible variants, they will likely infect people who were otherwise not going to get infected," Chin-Hong said.

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The news has left many worried about the efficacy of the latest Moderna and Pfizer COVID vaccines, which were designed to protect against the KP.2 variant—"a predecessor of KP.3.1.1," notes the *LA Times*. The Novavax vaccine was designed to protect against JN.1, which was prevalent earlier in the summer and known as the FliRT variant.

But Topol told the *Times* that "any booster will help induce a higher level of immunity."

And **Elizabeth Hudson**, MD, regional chief of infectious diseases for Kaiser Permanente Southern California, added, "there is some overlap, because these are all sub, sub, sub-grandchildren of the original Omicron. So there is still going to be some level of protection there."

Chin-Hong agreed that he has "full confidence in the vaccine."

"It's going to be a little hard to know where this is going to go, because right now, KP.3.1.1 really still is the predominant variant," Hudson continued. "So we have to really monitor not only what's happening within the U.S., but also what's happening in Europe as they get more towards their colder seasons."

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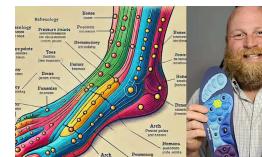
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1. [CDC: Monitoring Variant Proportions](#)

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