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The new XEC Covid variant is more contagious than its predecessors (Image: Getty Images)

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UK Covid spike – everything we know from tell-tale symptom to how to get test kit

A new and highly contagious Covid variant is on track to become most dominant in UK this week – with case numbers feared to rise as experts warn of a 'tripledemic'

By **Zahra Khaliq**, News Reporter
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A new and highly transmissible Covid variant is set to boost case numbers in the UK by Thursday, with experts warning that it could lead to a 'tripledemic' as people get their autumn vaccines ahead of time.



The strain, named XEC, evolved from **Omicron** but is more transmissible than its predecessors – and is on its way to becoming the most dominant in the UK. Experts have since warned it could represent over half of the new Covid infections in the UK by Thursday. Australian data scientist Mike Honey said: "For the UK, XEC is showing a strong growth advantage of 4.9% per day (34% per week) over the DeFluQE variants, which predicts a crossover in mid-October."

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New highly contagious Covid variant XEC on track to become most dominant in UK

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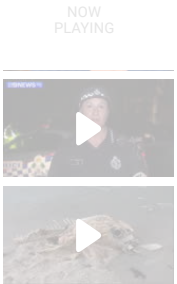
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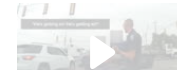
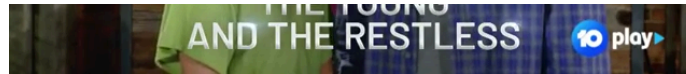
'Double whammy' of Covid infections wreaks havoc: blocked noses and coughs

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It comes after the **NHS** warned **the country may be set for a potential 'triple-demic'** of viruses this winter. If Brits fail to book their winter vaccines against the flu, covid-19 and RSV while the country enters what is expected to be a challenging winter, public health bosses say the three viruses could combine into a 'triple-demic'. The warning follows thousands being hospitalised with the viruses in **Australia** during their winter months – usually a predictor of what will happen in Britain.

Here is everything we know so far about the new XEC variant and how to protect yourself from falling ill this winter.





What are the tell-tale symptoms of the new XEC variant?



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The XEC variant is believed to have evolved from Omicron (Image: PA)

The XEC variant is believed to have evolved from a combination of two previously identified Omicron subvariants, KS.1.1 and KP.3.3.

It is considered a "recombinant variant", which forms when two separate variants infect a host at the same time, allowing the viruses to switch genetic information. This results in the creation of a new variant with characteristics from both "parent" lineages.

KS.1.1 is one of the group commonly known as "FLiRT" variants, while, KP.3.3 is one of the "FLuQE" variants. Both have contributed to recent surges in Covid infections globally. Symptoms are similar to previous variants and include a high temperature, aches, tiredness as well as a cough or **sore throat**. Both groups have been implicated in recent global Covid surges.

Eric Topol, Director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in California, told the LA Times that XEC is "just getting started". He stated: "And that's going to take many weeks, a couple of months, before it really takes hold and starts to cause a wave. XEC is definitely taking charge."

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How to get a test kit

According to the NHS, you're no longer required to do a COVID-19 rapid lateral flow test if you have symptoms, but if you're unwell or suspect you have Covid symptoms, you should try to stay at home and avoid contact with others to prevent spreading the infection.

While routine Covid testing is not recommended, people can still buy a test to carry out at home for around £2 from High Street and online chemists.

Who can get a free vaccine or booster jab?



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Some Brits are eligible for free vaccines and boosters (Image: PA)

The NHS has been administering flu and Covid boosters and vaccinations since October, but at the moment, only some people qualify for free jabs.

Among those eligible are all individuals aged over 65, elderly care home residents, clinical risk groups, and frontline health and social care workers. These groups are being urged to get the jab to protect themselves as part of an Autumn Covid booster drive.

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UKHSA Deputy Director, Dr Gayatri Amirthalingam, has urged those contacted by the NHS to get their autumn vaccines ahead of time.

Dr Gayatri said: "It is normal and expected for viruses to genetically change over time. UKHSA continues to monitor all available information relating to emerging Covid variants in the UK and internationally and to publish our data regularly. Vaccination provides the best protection against serious illness from Covid-19, and we urge those who are contacted by the NHS to come forward to receive their autumn vaccine."

For those who are not eligible for a free jab, High Street pharmacies and private clinics also offer Covid vaccinations, with prices ranging from £45 to £99.

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