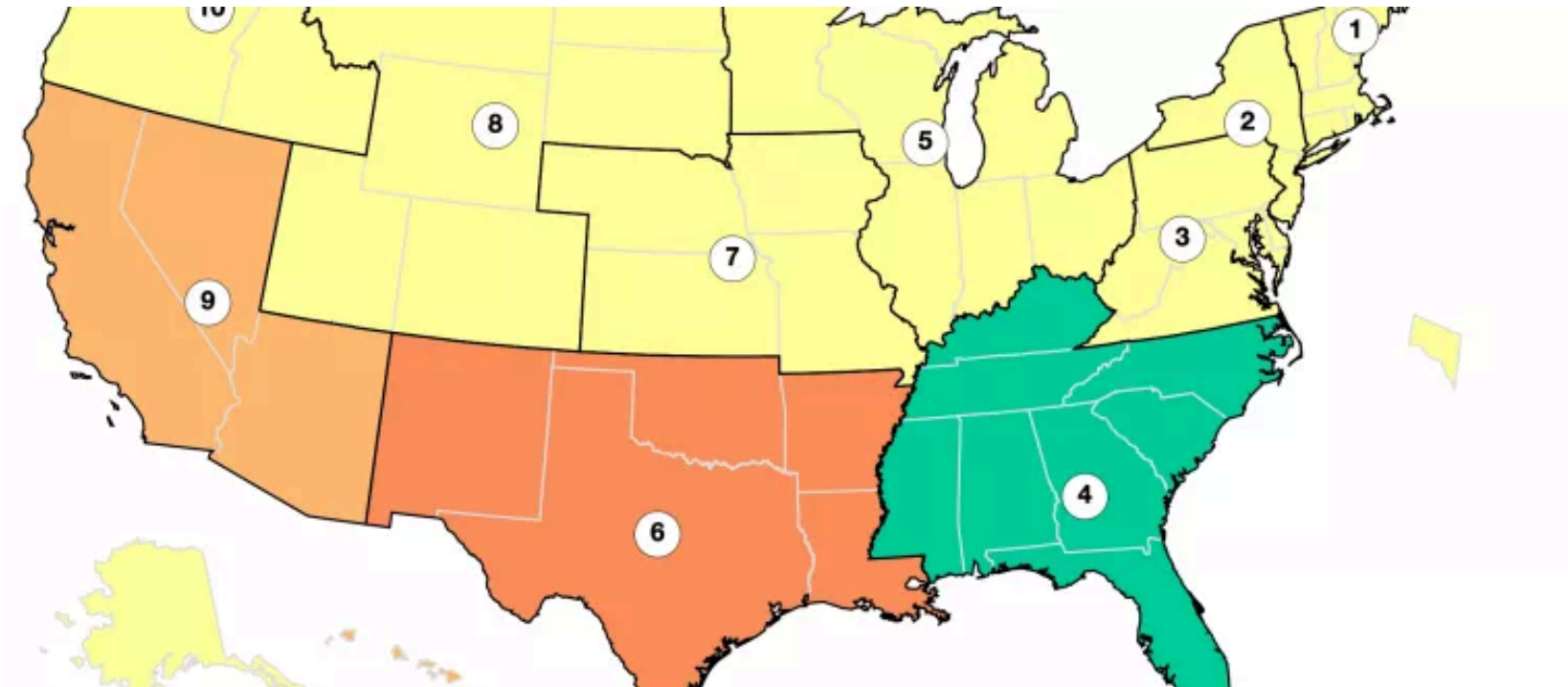
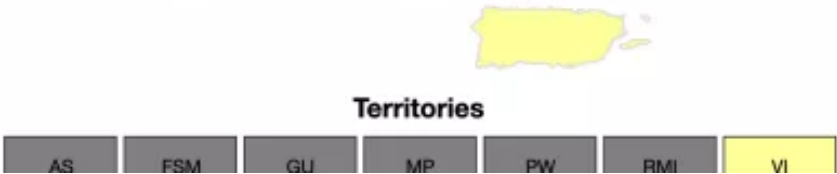


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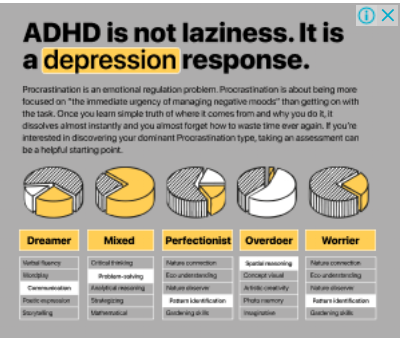
By [Pandora Dewan](#)
Senior Science Reporter

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A new variant has entered the COVID-19 picture, and scientists have warned that it might soon surge to dominance.



XEC, which was first identified in Germany in June, has now been spotted in Denmark, France, the Netherlands, the U.K., Canada and the U.S., according to [lineage tracking graphs](#) shared by data integration specialist Mike Honey on X (formerly [Twitter](#)).

@Mike_Honey_ · Follow

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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From what we know so far, the variant has some new mutations that might help it spread this autumn and into the winter months.

"XEC is definitely taking charge," Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in La Jolla, California, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "This does appear to be the next variant."

He added that it "is just getting started now."

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XEC is a rearrangement of two little-discussed preexisting variants: KS.1.1 and KP.3.3. In the U.S., the current dominant strain is KP.3.1.1, which now accounts for more than half of infections, as of September 14.

KP.3.1.1, like KP.3.3, belongs to a relatively new class of variants nicknamed the "FLiRT" variants, which are named after the mutations in the projections on the virus' surface that allow them to enter our cells.

These projections, known as spike proteins, are also used as targets by our immune systems and vaccines. So changing their shape allows the virus to evade immune recognition. And it looks like XEC might be doing the same thing.

"It does seem to be showing what we call a growth advantage over the JN.1, or the deFLuQE variants, or the FLiRT variants," Dr. Elizabeth Hudson, regional chief of infectious diseases for Kaiser Permanente Southern California, told the *Times*. "It's definitely one that I have my eye on."

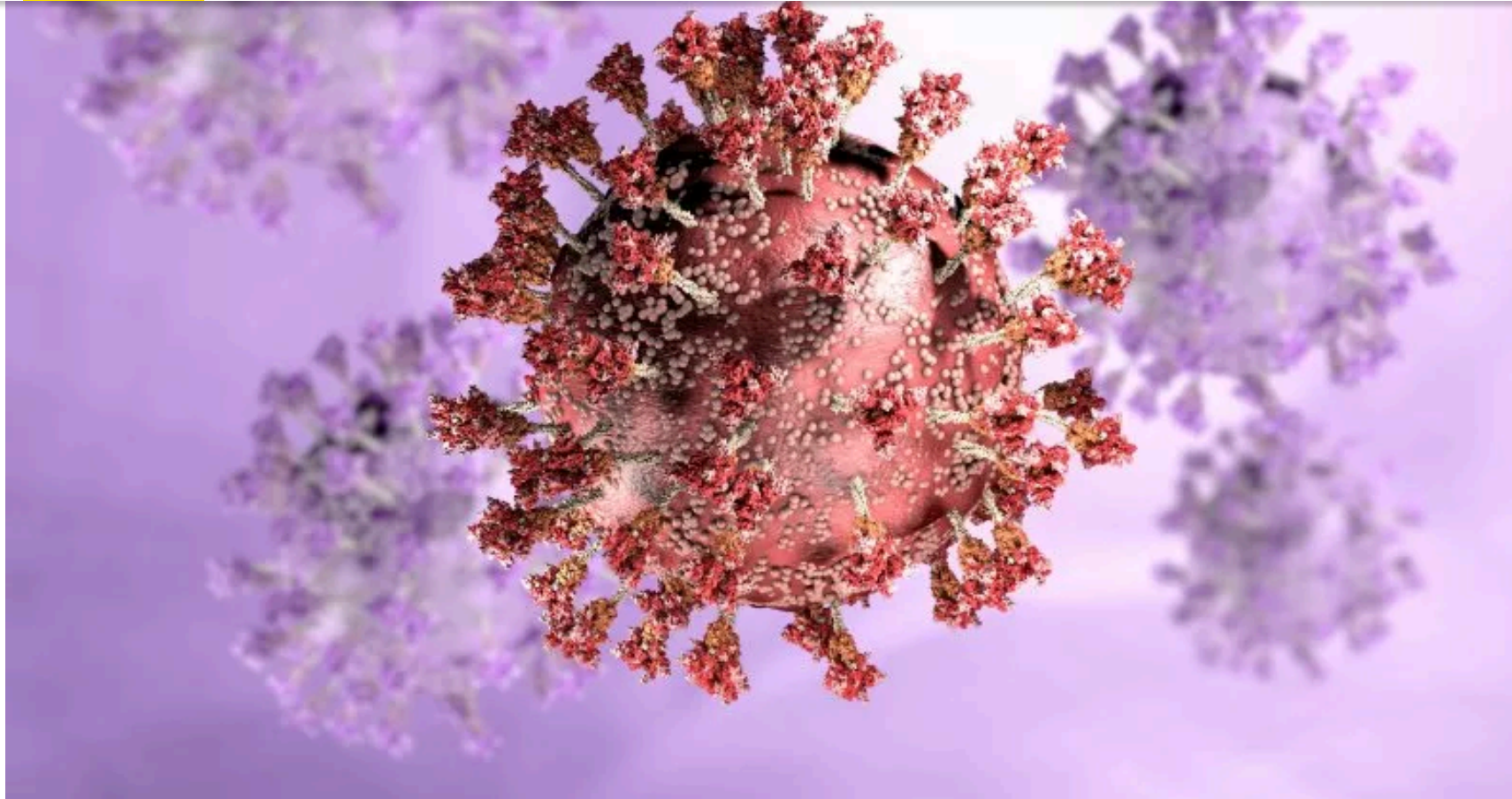
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While the variant has been detected in the U.S., it is not individually tracked by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's variant tracker because a lineage must be estimated to account for at least 1 percent of cases nationally for at least two weeks before it can be included. Topol said that we are weeks or even months away from XEC really taking hold.

It is unclear how well our existing vaccines will protect us against XEC. However, Topol said the differences between this new variant and the XBB.1.5 variant that vaccines were designed to target a year ago are "pretty substantial."

"We'll see how it plays out," Topol said. However, he added that "any booster will induce a higher level of immunity."

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An artist's impression shows a coronavirus, with its spike proteins. A new COVID-19 variant, XEC, has emerged in Europe, Canada and the U.S. **NAEBLYS/GETTY**

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"There is no evidence that XEC symptoms may differ from those caused by any other SARS-CoV-2 lineage currently in circulation; it is not anticipated that XEC will cause different symptoms," professor Francois Balloux—a computational systems biologist at University College London in England—said in a statement.

This means that the XEC will likely produce the cold- and flu-like symptoms seen with previous variants, including:

- High temperature
- Body aches
- Fatigue
- A cough or sore throat

Correction 09/18/24, 9:37 a.m. ET: This article was updated with comment from Francois Balloux.

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Pandora Dewan is a Senior Science Reporter at Newsweek based in London, UK. Her focus is reporting on science, health ... [read more](#)

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