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New highly contagious Covid XEC 'just getting started' - it's now on track to be most dominant in UK

The new XEC Covid variant has a "triple threat" of increased transmissibility, immune avoidance and severity, experts have warned

NEWS

By **Martin Bagot** Health and Science Correspondent & **Elaine Blackburne** Network Content Editor

12:31, 7 OCT 2024

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Experts say the XEC variant is set to take over in the UK (Image: Getty)

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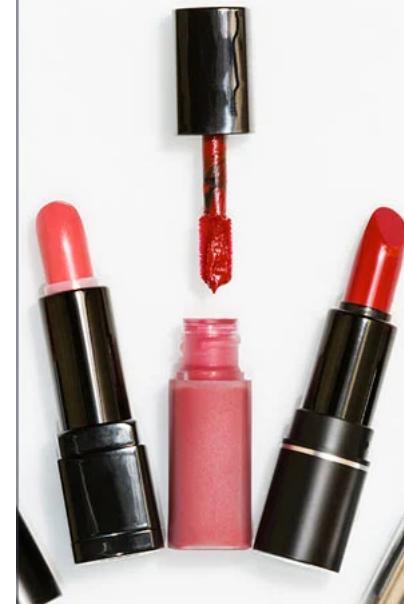
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A new Covid-19 variant named XEC is sweeping through Britain and on track to become the most dominant in the country within the week. This strain emerges from the family of Omicron and carries a higher transmission rate, now accounting for 21% of UK Covid cases, alarming health experts.

The timing coincides with the Autumnal booster campaign's launch earlier this month, targeting over-65s and other priority groups for vaccination as a defensive measure. The [NHS](#) is bracing for what some have termed a 'tripledemic', with influenza and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) also anticipated to present significant public health challenges this season.

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Such concerns are amplified by the recent situation in Australia, where an influx of hospitalisations due to these viruses during their winter typically serves as a forecast for what the UK might face. Australian data expert Mike Honey says XEC will account for more than half of new Covid infections in Britain by Thursday, [as reported by the 'i'](#).

He shared his insights via [Twitter](#) posting: "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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Gisaid, a global network of labs exchanging viral intelligence gathered from genetic sequencing of samples, highlights a marked rise in XEC prevalence since late August, when it accounted for just 5% of Covid contagions in the nation, reports [the Mirror](#).

The XEC variant, is believed to be a fusion of two previously identified Omicron subvariants, KS. 1.1 and KP. 3.3. This is known as a "recombinant variant" - which forms when two different variants infect a host simultaneously, allowing the viruses to exchange genetic information.

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This dangerous double infection leads to the creation of a new variant with characteristics from both "parent" lineages. KS. KS. 1.1 belongs to the group commonly known as "FLiRT" variants, while KP. 3.3 is part of the "FLuQE" variants.

Both groups have been instrumental in recent global Covid surges. Symptoms are similar to previous variants, including high temperature, aches, fatigue, cough or sore throat.

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Eric Topol, Director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in California, warned the LA Times that XEC is "just getting started". He said: "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. That does appear to be the next variant."

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) says it is normal for viruses to mutate and change. UKHSA data show Covid infections rose by nearly a tenth up to 5.05 people per 100,000 of the population on September 28, compared to 4.66 a week earlier.

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Dr Gayatri Amirthalingam, UKHSA Deputy Director, has 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."

With the NHS vaccine rollout for flu and Covid gaining full momentum in October, a broad swathe of society, including all over-65s, residents in elderly care homes, individuals within clinical risk groups, along with front-line NHS and social care workers, were invited to get their jabs. [Visit here](#) to discover how you can book your Covid booster via the NHS, should you qualify.

For those interested, High Street chemists alongside private clinics offer Covid vaccinations, with prices ranging from £45 to £99. Additionally, Covid tests are available

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