

# Insights into the Coronavirus Variants: What We're Watching

## *Q&A with Goodwin House Medical Leaders*

We asked Goodwin House Medical Director Dr. Mariatu Koroma-Nelson and Goodwin House Hospice Medical Director Dr. Margaret Gloria to share their insights on the COVID-19 variants and how they impact us at work and at home.

### **Q. What are variants of viruses and what makes the coronavirus variants unique?**

A. Viruses constantly change through mutations in the viral genome. New variants of a virus are expected to occur over time as viruses are replicating and mutating in order to survive. Sometimes, new variants emerge and disappear. Other times, new variants emerge and persist when they are selected through numerous rounds of viral replication. As an example, we know that normal variants of the influenza virus are why we have a yearly seasonal flu vaccine.

### **Q. How many variants of COVID-19 are there at present, and what are they?**

A. The coronavirus (like any virus) is always mutating, that's how it survives. A variant is considered a "variant of concern" when it is clinically significant in the sense that it is more contagious, causes more serious illness, changes the ability of vaccines to work against it, or any combination of these factors. Only the "variants of concern" will make the CDC's watch list. There are currently three such variants identified by the CDC:

- **B.1.1.7:** First identified in the U.K. in the fall of 2020
- **B.1.351:** First identified in South Africa in early October 2020
- **P.1:** First identified in Brazil in early January 2021



Dr. Koroma-Nelson received her vaccine at the Virginia Hospital Center in December 2020.

**Q. Are all these variants present in the U.S. right now? Are they present in the D.C. metro area?**

A. All three variants have been identified in the U.S., the B.1.1.7 (U.K.) variant being the most common. The U.K. variant has been detected in at least 33 U.S. states. The South African variant was first detected in South Carolina and Maryland in January 2021, and the P.1 (Brazil) variant was first detected in the U.S. in Minnesota in January 2021. Both B.1.1.7 (U.K.) and B.1.351 (South Africa) have been identified in Virginia and Maryland.



**Dr. Gloria received her vaccine at Goodwin House in February 2021.**

**Q. What is the level of effectiveness of the vaccines against the variants, especially the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines that GHI staff and residents received?**

A. Early data is showing that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines work well against the U.K. strain (B.1.1.7). There is some concern that these vaccines will not work as well against the Brazilian (P.1) and South African (B.1.351) strains, though both vaccine manufacturers have said they expect their vaccines to still be efficacious if maybe somewhat less so than the roughly 95% efficacy rate against the original strain. Early data suggests that current vaccines could retain the ability to prevent hospitalizations and deaths, even in the face of decreased overall efficacy. More data needs to be collected before we know for certain.

For other vaccines, a recent study reported that the Novavax vaccine had an 89% efficacy rate against the U.K. variant and a 60% efficacy rate against the South African variant.

**Q. What can I do to protect myself from contracting a variant? Do I need to do anything differently than what I have been doing to protect myself against the original COVID-19 virus?**

A. All the current precautions that we are already taking will protect you from contracting any of the new variants. It's especially important now to avoid crowded indoor spaces or spaces where there is not a lot of airflow. Make sure that you're wearing face masks that fit properly (covering your nose and mouth completely) and practicing good hand hygiene.

You should also evaluate any travel plans you may have. Consider postponing international travel and be aware of the positivity rates in domestic destinations.

**Q. What is the impact of these variants on the Safe Path Forward and resuming more of our pre-pandemic lives and activities, both within and outside of GHA and GHBC?**

A. Our progression back to pre-COVID “normal” will be slow and measured. We will continue to monitor the news and guidance from the CDC and local health departments, especially in relation to the variants. Our Safe Path Forward will balance returning services and amenities with safety – ensuring we continue using PPE, having good ventilation in public and private spaces, limiting situations that could cause overcrowding and implementing procedures for infection control.

**Q. For those who want to learn more about the variants and stay current on developments, are there any newsletters or websites that you would recommend?**

A. We recommend checking the [CDC's COVID-19 variant website](#). There is an interactive map where you can see how many and which variants have been reported in your area. Keep in mind that the U.S. is only “spot checking” samples for variants, so these numbers are probably much higher. *The New York Times* also has [a COVID-19 variant page](#) that offers scientific schematics of the virus and its specific mutations and is available for free to the public.