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Geneva, January 18 (RHC)-- A highly infectious mutation of the novel coronavirus first recorded in the United Kingdom last month has spread to dozens of countries, according to the World Health

Organization (WHO).

Since being reported to the WHO on December 14, the UK-identified variant VOC 202012/01 has been found in 50 countries, territories and areas, the United Nations body said in its weekly report on the pandemic. Test results showed the age and sex distribution of the UK-identified variant were similar to that of other circulating variants.

Meanwhile, a similar South African-identified strain, 501Y.V2, has been found in 20 countries, territories and areas after first being reported to the WHO on December 18, according to the WHO. "From preliminary and ongoing investigations in South Africa, it is possible that the 501Y.V2 variant is more transmissible than variants circulating in South Africa previously," the agency's weekly report said.

"Moreover, while this new variant does not appear to cause more severe illness, the observed rapid increases in case numbers has placed health systems under pressure." The geographical spread of both variants is likely underestimated, said the WHO.

Fears over the increased transmissibility of the new variants are prompting fresh lockdowns and extra measures to contain COVID-19. The strains share a common mutation, which scientists call N501Y. This is a slight alteration on one spot of the spike protein that coats the virus. That change is believed to be the reason these strains can spread so easily.

Most of the vaccines being rolled out around the world train the body to recognise that spike protein and fight it. British scientists have said the variant found in the UK – which has become the dominant type in parts of England – still seemed to be susceptible to vaccines.

The South African strain is causing more concern, however, due to an additional mutation that has scientists on edge, one named E484K, which may render certain vaccines less effective.

The WHO also noted on Tuesday that a third new coronavirus variant "of concern", found in Japan, needs further investigation. The health agency said it had been notified by Japan on January 9 of the new variant detected in four travellers arriving from Brazil. The variant was found in two adults and two children.

The WHO held a meeting of 1,750 international scientists on Tuesday to discuss critical knowledge gaps and research priorities for emerging variants. "Our collective goal is to get ahead of the game and have a global mechanism to quickly identify and study variants of concern and understand their implications for disease control efforts," said Ana Maria Henao Restrepo, the WHO's research and development chief.

The WHO said the new variants showed the importance of increasing diagnostic capacity and systematic sequencing of the virus. "Research is ongoing to determine the impact of new variants on transmission, disease severity as well as any potential impacts on vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics," the organisation said.

"The more the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads, the more opportunities it has to change. High levels of transmission mean that we should expect more variants to emerge," it added.

SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that causes COVID-19 disease. Viruses constantly undergo minor changes as they spread from person to person. More than 90 million COVID-19 infections have been recorded globally since cases first appeared late last year. The death toll from the pandemic is nearing two million people.



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