

At least 20 cases of COVID variant found in France

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France first detected a handful of instances of the B.1.617 variant late last month [File: Eric Gaillard/Reuters]

Paris, May 11 (RHC)-- The coronavirus variant first detected in India appears to be on the rise in France, which has now recorded at least 20 cases, according to the country's health minister. On Monday, Olivier Veran told French news channel LCI that people affected had been identified in five small clusters, local media reported.

Veran did not specify where the cases had been recorded but said the variant, formally known as B.1.617, was "not spreading rapidly" in the country. France first detected a handful of instances of the variant late last month. Veran's comments came as concerns grow over the strain as B.1.617 is linked to a devastating wave of infections in India.

It has since spread outwards to about 20 other countries, including several European nations, prompting fresh travel restrictions with India. The World Health Organization (WHO) has described B.1.617 as a "variant of interest", suggesting it may have mutations that would make the virus more transmissible, cause more severe disease, or evade vaccine immunity.

Other strains with known risks, such as those first detected in the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Africa, have been categorised as "variants of concern" – a higher threat level. B.1.617 contains two notable mutations – formally known as E484Q and L452R.

This has led to it sometimes being dubbed the "double mutant" strain, though this is something of a misnomer as it actually carries more than a dozen mutations altogether.

Despite the rise in cases, Veran confirmed that France will continue with plans to reopen bars and restaurants for outdoor service on May 19, as the third wave of the pandemic appears to be easing. Authorities will also start relaxing a nightly curfew. "The prospects look rather good but we must not let down our guard," Veran told LCI television.

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