

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

What Employers Should Know About the New COVID-19 Variant – XBB.1.5

January 2023



Overview

Coronavirus continues to evolve swiftly, and a new variant known as XBB.1.5 has been rapidly spreading in the U.S. As of January 14, 2023, the CDC estimated it made up 82% of new cases in the Northeast and 43% across the country, making it the most transmissible variant detected to date.¹

Key Facts

1

The concern about XBB.1.5 is that it is more transmissible and more likely to evade the protection of existing immunity, whether from prior infection, vaccination or both.



2

XBB.1.5 is dominant in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic and is expected to spread rapidly to other parts of the country.



3

With the rise of XBB.1.5, hospitalizations have increased, although they are still lower than the peak in early winter of 2022.



4

Paxlovid appears to be effective against XBB.1.5; however, this new strain is resistant to other monoclonal treatments used to treat COVID-19 earlier in the pandemic.



5

Eligible adults and children are encouraged to receive the Omicron bivalent booster as it is expected to help reduce severe disease and hospitalization due to XBB.1.5 infections.





Five Steps to Inform Your Workforce and Help Keep Employees Healthy

- 1 Tools to help fight variants include:**
 - **Masks:** Current CDC guidance is more specific to the health risks of the mask wearer. People with certain health conditions should wear masks. They also recommend masking in indoor public transportation settings, busses, trains, airports, etc.²
 - **Vaccines:** Promote vaccines and boosters
 - **Ventilation:** Ensure proper ventilation
- 2 Increase awareness** of new variants with routine communications and ask employees to stay vigilant.
- 3 Improve vaccine confidence** by doing the following:
 - Listen for misinformation circulating in your workforce and on-line
 - Share verified, accurate and easy-to-find information with your employees
 - Use trusted messengers to help share accurate information (Senior Leaders, ERG leaders, safety and wellness committee members).
- 4 Ask employees to get tested if they are symptomatic or have been exposed.** Encourage employees to **stay home** if they are feeling sick and are symptomatic to help decrease the chances of a workplace outbreak. Local and state resources can help connect people with testing and treatment if someone is feeling sick, especially for COVID-19.
- 5 Help employees get connected to a primary care provider (PCP),** so they have treatment options if they become ill or have symptoms. A primary care provider can give guidance on over-the-counter and prescription treatments. Routine and early care from a PCP lowers the likelihood of high-cost emergency care. Provide and promote home testing kit coverage through pharmacy benefits. Some plans offer both reimbursement and no out-of-pocket cost options.

Sources:

1) <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#variant-proportions>

2) [How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation | CDC](#)



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