

# MUMBAI CONFIRMS OMICRON'S XE RECOMBINANT VARIANT; UNION HEALTH MINISTRY DENIES IT

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Biotechnology, Genetics & Health related developments

A health worker takes a swab sample from a woman for COVID-19 test at NMMC Hospital in Navi Mumbai on March 24, 2022. | Photo Credit: PTI

The Union Health Ministry on Wednesday refuted claims that India has reported its first case of the [COVID-19 variant, XE](#), in Mumbai. The rebuttal came shortly after the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) said that the results of the 11th batch of next generation genome sequencing conducted by it on 230 COVID-19 positive patients had found one case of Omicron's new sub-variant, XE.

The BMC noted that a 50-year-old female patient, a costume designer by profession and a member of a film shooting crew, who had arrived from South Africa on February 10, 2022, had tested positive for XE. The civic body added that she is double vaccinated, and she tested negative for COVID-19 on arrival in India, but on March 2, 2022, in routine testing conducted by Suburban Diagnostics, she was found to be positive and quarantined. The result of the test done on the following day was negative.

According to the BMC, out of 230 COVID-19 patients tested, 228 were infected with the Omicron variant while one was infected by the Kappa variant. Of these, 21 had to be admitted to hospital. None of them was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) or needed oxygen support.

A senior health official, however, maintained, "FactQ files in respect of the sample, which is being said to be the XE variant, were analysed in detail by genomic experts of the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG), who have inferred that the genomic constitution of this variant does not correlate with the genomic picture of the XE variant."

The BMC in its release said: "The patient's lab sample has been referred to Kasturba Hospital Central laboratory for whole genome sequencing. It has been found to be a new XE variant in initial sequencing. Though GISAID also confirmed it, INSACOG has decided to go for another round of genomic sequencing at national laboratory for sure confirmation of XE variant."

"This lady is totally asymptomatic and found to be RT-PCR negative on repeat testing. XE, a new variant of COVID, is a combination of the BA.1 and BA.2 strains of Omicron and found to be responsible for enhanced viral transmission according to primary reports. Frequent changes in genomic structure are part of the natural life course of the viruses and there is no need to be scared but everyone should opt for appropriate precaution," the BMC said.

XE is a recombinant that's a mutation of the BA.1 and BA.2 Omicron strains. Recombinant mutations emerge when a patient is infected by multiple variants of a virus, according to experts.

INSACOG is the forum that was set up under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare by the Government of India on December 30, 2020 to monitor genome sequencing and virus variations of circulating strains of COVID-19 in India. The consortium ascertains the status of Variants of Interest (VoI) and Variants of Concern (VoC) in the country; establishes sentinel surveillance and surge surveillance mechanisms for early detection of genomic variants; and assists in formulating an effective public health response. It also determines the presence of genomic variants in samples collected during super-spreader events and in areas reporting increasing

trend of cases/deaths etc.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned of the new subvariant XE, stating that it's more transmissible than any strain of COVID-19. There are three hybrid or recombinant viruses in total that have been detected so far. These are XD, XE and XF, of which XD and XF are a combination of the Delta and Omicron variants. The XE variant is a hybrid of two versions of Omicron — BA.1 and BA.2.

The new mutant XE emerged for the first time in mid-January this year. Britain's health agency said on April 3 that XE was first detected on January 19, and 637 cases of the new variant have been reported in that country so far.

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