



UK Health
Security
Agency

03 January 2023

URGENT PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGE

Enhanced genome sequencing for hospitalised patients returning from China

Dear Colleagues,

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) continue to closely monitor the prevalence and spread of new SARS-CoV-2 variants and keep available international data under review.

China is currently experiencing its largest and most serious COVID-19 wave since the start of the pandemic. Whilst the number of publicly available genomes shared from China are much lower comparative to the UK, the available genomes from China and from other countries where testing has occurred suggests that the Omicron sub-lineages including those known to exist in Europe are circulating. While travel to the UK from China is currently low, it is likely to increase once quarantine requirements on return to China are removed on 8 January 2023.

However, if new sub-lineages or variants emerged which evaded the immune response of highly vaccinated individuals, they could pose a threat if they were successful enough to outcompete other variants and spread internationally. There is an established process for identifying and classifying variants within the UK.

As a precautionary measure, we are therefore requesting your assistance in the coming weeks to identify any COVID-19 hospitalised cases who have arrived from China in the preceding 14 days for sequencing. This will allow us to undertake enhanced surveillance on the variants circulating in China.

The recommendations on who requires testing and infection prevention and control measures in healthcare settings and the community is unchanged.

Action for Healthcare professionals

Clinicians involved in the assessment or management of COVID-19 patients are asked to note the following:

- For patients presenting with COVID-19 symptoms compatible with SARS-CoV-2, identify whether travel from China has taken place in the preceding 14 days
- If so collect a specimen for PCR testing if individuals have symptoms compatible with SARS-CoV-2
- Include China travel details on SARS-CoV-2 PCR request forms/ electronic requests
- Alert your NHS laboratories when sending a PCR swab for SARS-CoV-2 from patients presenting to healthcare settings within 2 weeks of arrival from China, particularly if they are presenting with severe illness.



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Action for NHS Labs

Labs are asked to

- Ensure there are clear local arrangements, reflecting this update in guidance, for testing and sampling of suspected SARS-CoV-2 cases and identifying a relevant travel history
- Identify swabs from patients presenting to healthcare settings within 2 weeks of arrival from China and send these swabs to UKHSA labs for expedited sequencing
- Please label with travel history to allow rapid sequencing in UKHSA labs

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