

To: Horizon staff and physicians
From: Dr. Gordon Dow, Regional Medical Director, Infectious Diseases
Date: Jan. 18, 2023
Re: Information about Omicron Subvariant XBB 1.5

The XBB COVID-19 subvariant was first detected in October 2022 and has been rapidly gaining steam in the U.S. as XBB 1.5 since it was first identified. It now accounts for 43% of new infections in that country. Other than its nickname, “The Kraken Variant,” there is nothing nightmarish about this virus. Here’s why:

- While XBB 1.5 is the most transmissible variant so far, you can say the same for every other variant that came before it (viruses only do one thing, they evolve to infect as many people as possible, so this is an expectation).
- While XBB is more transmissible, it does not cause more severe disease. The XBB wave has already passed over Singapore without a significant increase in deaths or hospitalizations.
- While XBB can infect someone who has had at least three doses of the original mRNA vaccines, current bivalent booster vaccines are able to neutralize this virus.
- The current increase in hospitalizations and deaths seen in the northeastern U.S. are more due to human behaviors than this variant (large social gatherings without any attention to public health measures and low bivalent booster uptake).

What is nightmarish?

A winter surge of COVID is predictable, and even though this will be far smaller than last year’s surge, our health care system will struggle to accommodate even a small rise in cases. The presence of other respiratory viruses, such as influenza and RSV, will also impact our health care system.

What can you do to protect yourself, your family and your patients?

- If it has been more than five months since your last COVID-19 vaccination or infection, please strongly consider getting a bivalent booster vaccine. (It works for XBB 1.5!)
- Please don’t go to work while sick (this is only acceptable when we have extreme staffing challenges, as per [Employee Health guidelines](#)).
- Please wear a mask in large social gatherings or during public transportation.
- Please wash your hands regularly.
- If your New Year’s resolution was to improve your physical fitness, we applaud you. A recent review by CDC has concluded that improving physical fitness reduces COVID severity (not as much as vaccines, but it does work).