



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DAVID Y. IGE
GOVERNOR

ELIZABETH A. CHAR, MD
DIRECTOR

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State laboratory guarding against new COVID-19 strains

Fast moving variants heighten concern about social gatherings

HONOLULU – The Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) continues to proactively test COVID-19 specimens looking for new strains that may be significantly more contagious or differ in other ways from earlier strains. Recent variants first discovered in the United Kingdom and South Africa are spreading more easily and quickly than other variants and have already spread to other countries. The B1.1.7 variant, first detected in the U.K., has already reached the U.S. mainland and Canada.

The Hawai'i State Laboratories Division (SLD) began its molecular surveillance in June and to date has performed genome sequencing on nearly 700 samples of viral RNA. Neither B1.1.7 nor B.1.351, the variant discovered in South Africa, has been found in Hawai'i, but that does not mean they are not here or will not arrive in the future.

"There is no evidence these variants cause more severe illness or increase the risk of death, but research shows they spread much faster than the COVID-19 already found in Hawai'i," said Dr. Libby Char, director of the Hawai'i Department of Health. "These new strains remind us how important it is to avoid large gatherings, wear masks, and practice physical distancing as we usher in the New Year."

The DOH is collaborating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to detect new variants of COVID-19 and contain their spread. The CDC has personnel in Hawai'i to support investigation of viral variants should they be found.

"We are monitoring the situation closely," said Dr. Edward Desmond, Director of the State Laboratories Division. "So far there is nothing to suggest that COVID-19 vaccines are ineffective against the new variants, but we still have a lot to learn about them."

Dr. Desmond and Dr. Janet Berreman, District Public Health Officer for Kaua'i, will be available at 2 p.m. today via Zoom to answer questions about the COVID-19 variants and the work being done in Hawai'i to guard against variants. Reporters interested in participating should contact Brooks Baehr at brooks.baehr@doh.hawaii.gov.

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