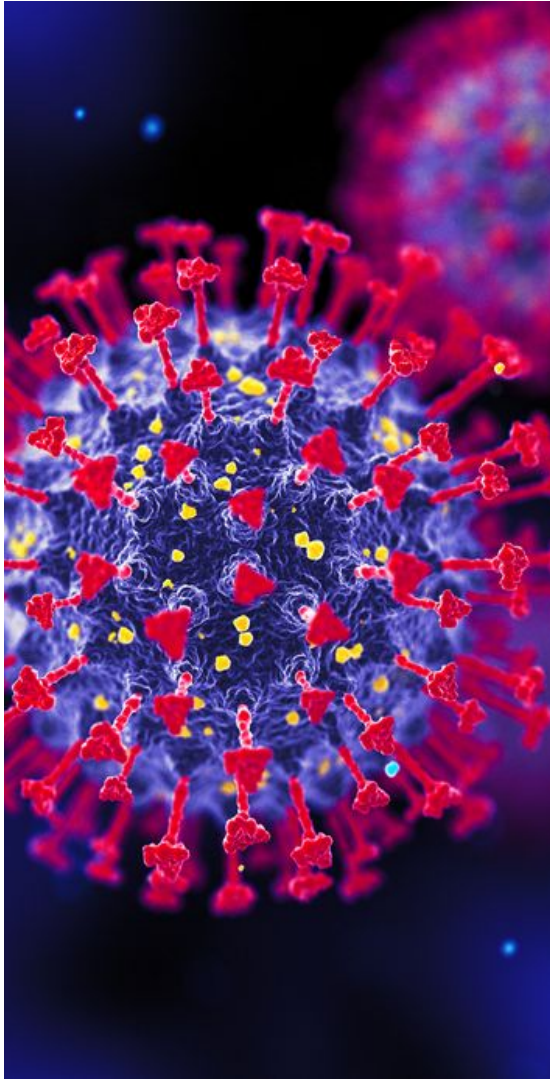


# BA.2.86 COVID variant



**What is BA.2.86?** A highly mutated variant of the COVID-19 virus, designated BA.2.86 and nicknamed “Pirola” has been detected in several countries in recent weeks. It was deemed a “variant under monitoring” by the World Health Organization on August 17th, 2023, and has put COVID-19 watchers on alert.

**Why does BA.2.86 matter?** BA.2.86 descended from the BA.2 lineage which is within the Omicron family of variants. Concern has been heightened because of the large number of mutations on the spike protein – more than 30 relative to BA.2 from which it descended. The number of mutations far exceeds what is present in the currently dominant XBB strain, which is the target of the version of vaccines to be released this fall.

**How concerned should we be about BA.2.86?** The number of mutations found in a variant does not necessarily correlate with its infectiousness or severity. We currently do not know if the numerous mutations in BA.2.86 will make it spread more easily or make people sicker. As of August 23rd, 2023, the CDC has stated that there is no current indication that this variant causes more severe illness.

**What is the bottom line on BA.2.86?** Many Omicron subvariants have emerged over the past 18 months. However, there has been no step-change in overall concern as these variants, while perhaps more transmissible, have not resulted in more severe illness. While we do not know exactly how BA.2.86 or other variants (such as EG.5) may evolve over the coming fall and winter, there is no need for undue concern today. The most effective protection is to stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccinations by receiving the fall booster vaccine in accordance with guidance from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI).