

Omicron or Delta? Why learning your COVID-19 variant isn't usually possible

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Omicron or Delta?

If you're sick with COVID-19, don't bother trying to find out which [variant](#) is causing the infection. Outside of a research study, there is little chance that an individual patient will be able to learn the variant type plaguing them, experts say, even though having the information may be

useful for doctors in making some treatment decisions for that particular person.

Telling the difference among COVID-19 variants requires sophisticated testing called genomic sequencing. Few labs do the work.

"There's no commercially available option to order sequencing," said Daniel Griffin, chief, Division of Infectious Disease at ProHealth, a [health care provider](#) based in New Hyde Park, N.Y. "We live in a capitalist society, so you'd think someone would've jumped in. A lot of us would find it useful to have access to that information."

To identify the wider spread of variants, state Health Department labs earmark a certain percentage of COVID-19 samples for [genomic sequencing](#), information that can identify a particular variant down to the ZIP code level. But patients rarely get the test results, which can take up to a couple weeks.

"The most important thing is knowing whether you have COVID-19," said Johns Hopkins University molecular biologist Peter Thielen, "and how that affects how you interact with the people around you."

Regardless of which variant is causing the infection, the importance of quarantining during the most infectious period, masking in public and washing your hands are unchanged, Thielen said. Some medicines to prevent or treat COVID-19 are slowly becoming available, but the treatment protocols overall are similar, regardless of variant.

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