BA.2.86: Current vaccines do not offer protection against new globally-spreading COVID variant

A highly mutated form of the coronavirus that threatens to be the most adept yet at slipping past the body’s immune defenses is capturing the attention of virologists and health officials.

While only about a dozen cases of the new BA.2.86 variant have been reported worldwide — including three in the United States — experts say this variant requires intense monitoring and vigilance that many of its predecessors did not. That’s because it has even greater potential to escape the antibodies that protect people from getting sick, even if you’ve recently been infected or vaccinated.

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BA.2.86 stands out in the omicron family tree because of how much it has morphed. It has more than 30 mutations on its spike protein, the part of the virus that pierces through the cell and that vaccines train the body to fend off. Experts believe the antibodies forged through battles with earlier variants will have a difficult time recognizing this new foe.

“This is a radical change of the virus, like what happened with omicron, which caught a lot of people defenseless,” said Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute. “Even if they had a vaccine or prior infection, it could still get into them and infect them again or for the first time. We are facing that again.”

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