The World Health Organization classified the SARS-CoV-2 variant “Omicron” (pronounced AH-muh-kraan) as a variant of concern. This variant contains about 50 mutations though researchers won’t know for several more days if these mutations contribute to increased transmissibility, virulence, or vaccine resistance. Omicron, also known as the B.1.1.529 variant, was first reported to WHO from South Africa on November 25. As of today, the variant has been detected in at least 20 countries, including the United States.

The CDC expanded the eligibility for who may and should get a COVID-19 booster shot. All adults 18 years and older who received a Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine may get a booster shot at least six months after their second dose. All adults 50 years and older and all adults 18 years and older who live in long-term care settings should get a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose at least six months after their second dose. All recipients of the J&J COVID-19 vaccine should get a booster shot at least two months after their initial dose. CDC allows a mix-and-match approach to booster shots.

The CDC issued updated EUI (Emergency Use Instructions) for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. This vaccine can be given as an additional primary dose or booster dose to people who completed a vaccine primary series with certain non-FDA authorized COVID-19 such as AstraZeneca, Novavax, and Sinopharm, among others. The new EUI aim to increase protection among those who were vaccinated outside of the U.S. or who received certain non-FDA authorized or approved COVID-19 vaccines through participation in clinical trials.

The FDA says that Merck’s COVID-19 pill is effective at reducing serious COVID-19 outcomes, but some are concerned about the possible risks of birth defects and other pregnancy-related problems. An FDA advisory panel met on 11/30 and voted 13-10 to endorse the pill from Merck for high-risk adults, thereby recommending that the government, for the first time, authorize an antiviral pill to combat the most severe effects of COVID-19. Members who voted against this recommendation requested more research into its possible side effects.

Last week, the United States was averaging about 95,000 new COVID-19 cases a day, which represents an increase of about 25% over two weeks. This uptick has been mostly attributed to rising caseloads in the Upper Midwest and Northeast. Reports of new cases are up more than 80% in Massachusetts and up more than 70% in Illinois. National statistics show a decrease in caseloads since Thanksgiving; however, this is likely a result of holiday reporting practices and might not be representative of real-world trends.