



Adviesaanvraag

Vraagsteller	Minister Vandenbroucke
Datum van adviesaanvraag	20/12/2020
Onderwerp	Nieuwe variant van COVID-19
Vraag	- Welke additionele maatregelen zou het land kunnen nemen om (verdere) verspreiding van deze variant tegen te gaan?
Reden	- Maatregelen genomen door Verenigd Koninkrijk en Nederland - Op EU-niveau worden discussies gevoerd over het nemen van maatregelen m.b.t. de grenzen

Adviesverstrekking

Datum van adviesverstrekking	20/12/2020
Dit advies werd opgesteld en goedgekeurd door	<p>De volgende leden van de expertgroep Beheerstrategie: Isabelle Aujoulat, Philippe Beutels, Steven Callens, Bénédicte Delaere, Mathias Dewatripont, Frédéric Fripiat, Lode Godderis, Niel Hens, Yves Kreins, Tinne Lernout, Romain Mahieu, Christelle Meuris, Geert Molenberghs, Karine Moykens, Céline Nieuwenhuys, Michel Thieren, Pierre Van Damme, Steven Van Gucht, Yves Van Laethem, Marc Van Ranst, Dimitri Van der Linden, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Erika Vlieghe, Dirk Wildemeersch</p> <p>In samenwerking met de RAG epidemiologie en enkele leden van de taskforce testing.</p>



1. Background

The COVID-19 Genomics Consortium UK report on a rapidly growing lineage (B.1.1.7) in the UK associated with an unexpectedly large number of genetic changes including in the receptor-binding domain and associated with the furin cleavage site [Rambaut et al. 2020].

For the detailed assessment of the risks associated with this new UK-variant and with possible other variants, we refer to the report of the Risk Assessment Group dd. 20/12/2020, as well as the assessment by the ECDC dd. 20/12/2020.

2. Conclusion and concrete recommendations

1. The fast emergence and spread of the novel UK strain is a worrisome evolution, but as mentioned in the RAG-report, more information is needed to assess the real impact on transmission and/or diagnostic accuracy or vaccine efficacy. Awaiting further information, action may be warranted out of the precautionary principle. A possible increase in transmissibility and/or lack of diagnostic accuracy may lead to more cases, and eventually also more hospitalisations and deaths. Further spread of this variant needs to be prevented.
2. It is not excluded however that other mutant strains circulate in other countries, including Belgium. They may just not have been picked up due to the limited level of molecular surveillance in many countries, including Belgium. There is substantial concern about the likelihood that cases from abroad will be imported during and after the Christmas holiday, in terms of absolute numbers and potential import of the UK or yet other variants, as was observed mutatis mutandis after the summer holidays
3. In Belgium, we observe a worrisome increase of cases and clusters in several border municipalities in Belgium. It is not yet clear whether this fast increase and clustering can be linked to the UK-variant, due to absence of systematic molecular surveillance.
4. We assess the ongoing international and transnational travel as a high risk for further deterioration of the epidemiological situation.
5. We therefore propose to reinforce and expand our earlier statements and recommendations regarding the risk of international travel as done in our GEMS-report dd. 15/12/2020:
 - a. Urgent strengthening of large-scale testing and quarantine for all incoming international travellers is essential. The examples from several countries in Asia and Oceania clearly show how this can contribute to much better control of the virus.
 - b. We therefore support the already taken decisions to temporarily suspend incoming travellers from the UK by air, ship or train until further notice. However, given the possible risks from incoming travellers from non-UK-destinations, we recommend expanding stringent measures for all incoming travellers into Belgium.
 - c. This can be done by either (1) closing the borders for all incoming non-Belgian citizens and/or by (2) requesting all incoming travellers (regardless of their personal risk assessment) to have proof of a negative test (or immediate test upon arrival) plus



- supervised quarantine (including a test at d1 and d7, as recommended earlier by the RAG and RMG, which should be in line with guidelines for high risk contacts). Any decision regarding borders requires obviously close concertation with the other EU member States.
- d. The use of empty hotel rooms and similar facilities is strongly advised as a solution for those in need of a safe space for carrying out supervised quarantine
 - e. Awaiting the logistic arrangements of a more performant testing and quarantine system, it could be considered to close air-, train- and seaports and perform intensive controls at the borders over land until a stringent quarantine policy is in place
 - f. In addition, the major incoming routes by road (i.e. through Calais or Dunkerque) need to be taken into account, e.g. through systematic testing of all drivers with rapid antigen tests before entering the country. Close collaboration with France would be required
 - g. Of note, in order to make more stringent testing and quarantine measures effective and bearable, there is a need for extensive financial, logistical and psychological support, tailored to different layers of society.
6. There is a need for an urgent set up of genetic/molecular surveillance system with systematic sequencing of all large and unexplained clusters, outbreaks... in Belgium. We refer to the recent e-mail correspondence between the National reference laboratory, the RIZIV and the cabinet of minister Vandenbroucke for further details and suggested planning. Of note, four Belgian laboratories are already carrying out these analysis (i.e. Antwerp (outbreaks), Gent (outbreaks), Liege (provincial surveillance) and the national reference lab, but too few samples to draw any conclusions.
7. We want to stress finally the vital importance of implementing motivational measures and communication as an investment in people's adherence to the existing measures, as described in our GEMS-report dd. 15/12/2020.