

VCovid in Italy: 54% of infections are due to the English variant, 4.3% to the Brazilian variant and 0.4% to the South African variant

March 2, 2021

These numbers come from the new 'flash survey' conducted by ISS and the Ministry of Health in cooperation with regional laboratories and Fondazione Bruno Kessler

In Italy, as of February 18, the prevalence of the so-called 'English variant' of the Sars-CoV-2 virus was 54.0%, with values ranging between 0% and 93.3% in the different regions, while for the 'Brazilian' one was 4.3% (0% -36.2%) and for the 'South African' one was 0.4% (0% -2.9%).

For the investigation, the laboratories of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces were asked to select subsamples of positive cases and to sequence the genome of the virus, according to the procedures described in the circular of the Ministry of Health of February 17.

The samples were selected by the Regions/Autonomous Provinces randomly among positive ones, considering geographical representation and, when possible, different age groups. 21 Regions, for a total of 101 laboratories participated in the survey and 1296 samples were sequenced.

These are the situation that emerged from the survey*

The so-called 'English variant' is becoming the prevailing one in the country, and in consideration of its greater transmissibility it is necessary to strengthen/raise the mitigation measures throughout the country in order to contain and reduce the spread of the virus by maintaining or rapidly bringing the Rt number back to values <1 and the incidence to values that will allow the tracking of all cases.

The data shows a clear geographical expansion from the Umbrian epicenter to regions such as Lazio and Tuscany of the so-called 'Brazilian variant', which must be contrasted with the strongest mitigation measures.

Interviewed on the TG1 national news on March 1, FBK epidemiologist **Stefano Merler** comments on the incidence of the new variants and the general situation with infections on the rise: "We do not have a crystal ball; today, we cannot tell how much the epidemic will grow. It depends on many factors that are not clear at this time, including the greater transmissibility of the English variant in Italy with estimates ranging from 18-60%, that make the evolution very uncertain. Nonetheless, **the possibility that the epidemic will grow is realistic**. In fact, the epidemiological situation is worsening, even markedly in some Italian Regions. The RT number is above the threshold of 1 in 10 reasons".

About **the incidence of the variants** and the **protection ensured by current vaccines**, Merler adds: "The English variant is now widespread throughout the national territory. In early February, 20% of new infections were due to the English variant, now that percentage will go up. **On the bright side, the vaccines work against the English variant**".

Finally, about the **transmissibility of the variants**, he concludes: "We should monitor the prevalence of the Brazilian and the South African variants, which pose us a couple more problems from the point of view of vaccine efficacy; it is right to do everything we can to try and contain infections locally where we find outbreaks of these two variants".

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* The main advantage of so-called flash surveys, compared to a regular survey, is that it is much faster, providing results almost instantly.

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