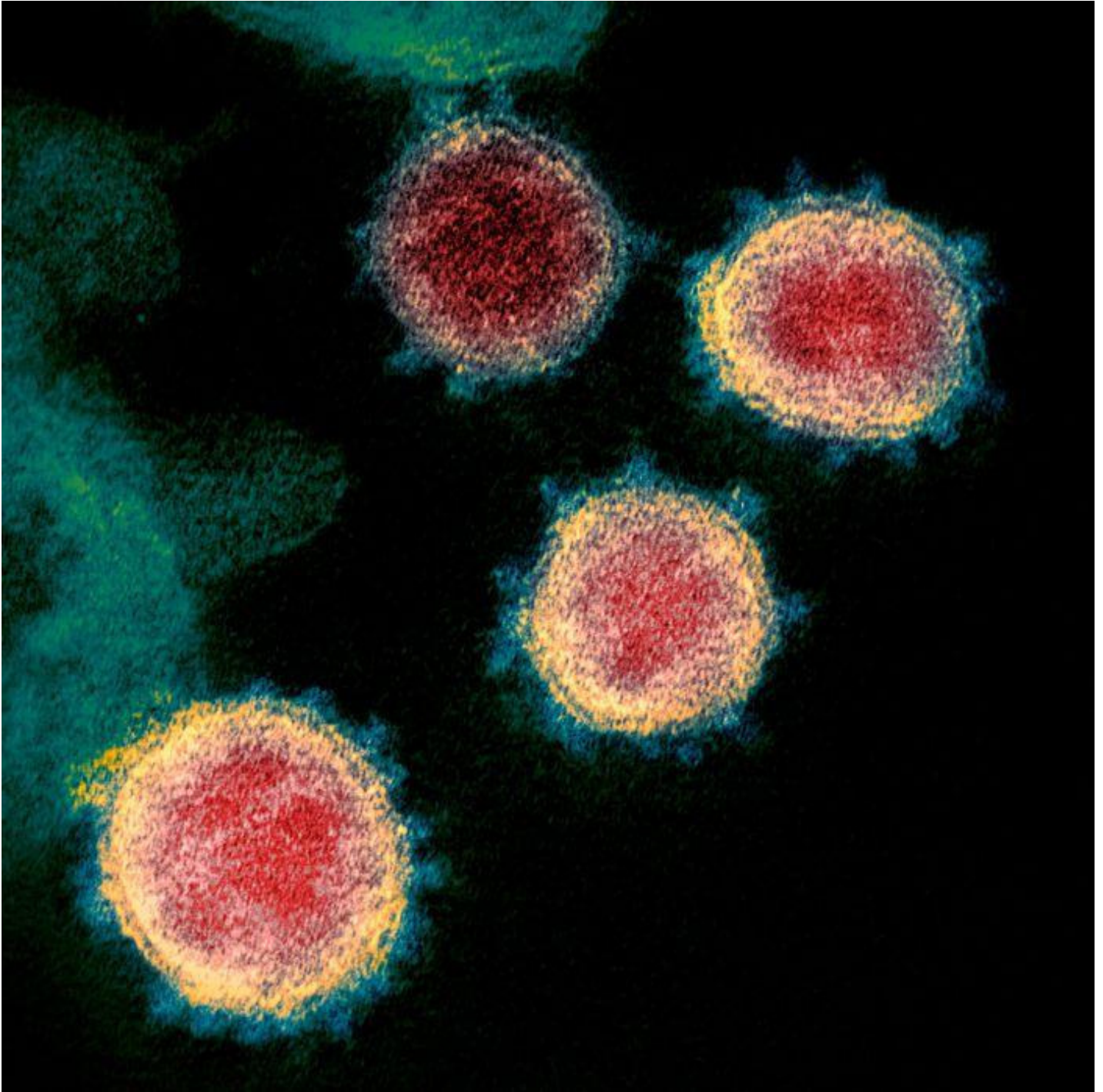


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More Contagious Form of the Coronavirus 'Rapidly Emerging' As Dominant Strain, Study Says

By Adam K. Raymond



COVID-19 Photo: Uncredited/AP/Shutterstock/Uncredited/AP/Shutterstock

The dominant strain of the coronavirus that has swept through the United States, killing nearly 70,000 people, is a mutant form of the original virus that emerged in China last year, according to a preprint from researchers at the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The researchers call the mutant strain D614G and wrote that it is more contagious than other strains. The paper, which has not been peer-reviewed, says the strain began its rapid spread in February in Europe and followed the path of the original virus to the U.S., where it quickly became the dominant strain. [The L.A. Times](#) describes how the mutated virus spread:

Italy was one of the first countries to see the new virus in the last week of February, almost at the same time that the original strain appeared. Washington was among the first states to get hit with the original strain in late February, but by March 15 the mutated strain dominated. New York was hit by the original virus around March 15, but within days the mutant strain took over.

The researchers identified 14 mutations of the virus, but D614G is of “urgent concern,” they wrote. Not only has this particular form of the virus spread rapidly, but researchers warn that it may leave “individuals susceptible to a second infection.”

The *Times* quoted from the Facebook page of Bette Korber, the leader of the study, which was conducted by tracking mutations in the genetic sequence of the virus:

“The story is worrying, as we see a mutated form of the virus very rapidly emerging, and over the month of March becoming the dominant pandemic form,” study leader Bette Korber, a computational biologist at Los Alamos, wrote on her Facebook page. “When viruses with this mutation enter a population, they rapidly begin to take over the local epidemic, thus they are more transmissible.”

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At least one expert has issues with the suggestion that the mutant form of the virus spread more rapidly because of its unique characteristics. Rather, [tweets](#) Bill Hanage, an associate professor at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the mutant form may have become dominant by chance.



Bill Hanage ✓
@BillHanage



This preprint has been getting attention. It claims that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is mutating into a more transmissible form as the

pandemic wears on. I think those claims are suspect, to say the least [biorxiv.org/content/10.110... 1/n](https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.05.01.321111)

Spike mutation pipeline reveals the emerge...

We have developed an analysis pipeline to facilitate real-time mutation tracking in SARS-CoV-2, focusing initially on the Spike (S) protein
[biorxiv.org](https://www.biorxiv.org)

♥ 1,586 8:48 AM - May 2, 2020



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“This variant might have been lucky and got introduced to places outside Wuhan and different approaches to social distancing early on,” he wrote. “It’s not about the virus, it’s the environment and the opportunities for transmission.”

The study throws cold water on the hopes that the virus that causes COVID-19 is mutating slowly, which researchers have said makes them hopeful about the development of a vaccine. Typically, more mutations complicate the vaccine-development process and it was concerns over that issue that motivated the Los Alamos researchers to conduct the study in the first place. “The interventions under development now cannot afford to miss their contemporary targets when they are eventually deployed,” they wrote.