

A third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine may protect against omicron, the newest variant of the coronavirus labeled a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization after it was reported by South African health officials.

The companies said Wednesday that two doses of their vaccine may provide protection from severe disease but may not be sufficient to protect against infection with omicron, according to preliminary lab data. A third dose offers more robust protection, providing a level of neutralizing antibodies against omicron similar to the level observed after two doses against the original coronavirus and other variants.

Antibody levels predict how well a vaccine may prevent infection with the coronavirus, but they are just one layer of the immune system's defenses. The companies are also developing an omicron-specific vaccine.

Scientists and health officials are still conducting studies to learn more about omicron. There are already cases in at least one-third of U.S. states, and early information indicates it could be more contagious, but perhaps less dangerous than previous variants such as delta.

"Our preliminary, first data set indicate that a third dose could still offer a sufficient level of protection from disease of any severity caused by the omicron variant," CEO and Co-Founder of BioNTech Ugur Sahin said in a statement.