WHAT ARE VARIANTS?
The term “variant” simply means a strain of the COVID-19 virus that has changed or “mutated.” All viruses go through changes, including COVID-19.

As viruses reproduce themselves, tiny changes happen in the genetic material or “recipe” that viruses use to make the essential proteins that comprise the structure of the virus. While these small changes exist in the genetic material of all COVID-19 viruses, most of these changes in the “recipe” do not result in any changes to the proteins. We don’t notice these strains because they act the same as other COVID-19 viruses. Sometimes, however, the mutations result in the changes to the proteins that result in the virus being more able to get into cells or to make people sick. These become “variants of concern” when they start spreading.

ARE THERE CURRENTLY ANY VARIANTS OF CONCERN?
There are three variants of concern: the UK, South African, and Brazilian variants.

Each of these has changes to the spike protein on the outside of the virus particle that make it easier for the virus to enter the cells. These variants, if left unchecked, can spread more easily through communities and become the dominant virus in time. We are still learning about these variants.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE CURRENT COVID-19 VACCINE AGAINST THESE VARIANTS OF CONCERN?
We know that the antibodies we develop after being vaccinated do recognize the variants of concern. What we don’t know is whether these antibodies are just as effective against these variants as they are against viruses without changes to their proteins. Scientists are hard at work investigating this and adjusting vaccines to potentially ensure their effectiveness. They believe that most vaccines will protect people from having a severe case of COVID-19, including from new COVID-19 variants.

ARE THERE VARIANTS OF CONCERN IN BC, AND HOW CAN WE PROTECT OURSELVES FROM THEM?
Fortunately, in BC and even in Canada we do not have high levels yet – and we want to keep it that way.

The main ways we can protect ourselves and others is to keep practising public health measures even after getting vaccinated. The fewer chances we give the virus to multiply, the less of the virus there will be, and the fewer chances it will have to mutate.