

Coronavirus outbreak sidelines ship whose crew is fully immunized, Navy says

[Andrew deGrandpre](#) December 24, 2021



U.S. Navy sailors prepared to drop anchor as the USS Milwaukee arrived on Dec. 20, 2021, at Naval Station Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, for what was expected to be a brief stop for fuel and provisions. (Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Danielle Baker/U.S. Navy/U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command)

A [coronavirus](#) outbreak aboard the USS Milwaukee, whose entire crew was “100 percent immunized,” has forced the ship to remain in port after a scheduled stop in Cuba barely one week into its deployment, the Navy announced Friday.

An unspecified “portion” of the Milwaukee’s 105-person crew is isolated aboard the ship at Naval Station Guantánamo Bay, according to Cmdr. Kate Meadows, a spokeswoman for U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command. The Navy does not disclose infection counts “at the crew/unit level,” she said in an email.

Some of the personnel who tested positive for the virus have displayed mild symptoms, Meadows said. Officials have not determined whether the highly transmissible omicron variant — which has demonstrated an ability to evade coronavirus vaccines, leading to a surge in breakthrough infections — is responsible for the Milwaukee’s outbreak.

Meadows would not disclose whether any of those infected had received booster shots or if Navy leaders may seek to require them in a bid to prevent future outbreaks during the deployment. “Boosters,” she said, “are not yet mandatory but recommended.”

It is unclear how long the Milwaukee may be sidelined. Meadows said Saturday that the ship’s commanders are working with senior military leaders to make that determination and that, in the meantime, they have imposed a mask mandate for all personnel aboard.

[*Vaccine holdouts in U.S. military approach 40,000 even as omicron variant fuels call for boosters*](#)

Omicron is the fifth coronavirus variant of concern and is spreading rapidly around the world. Here’s what we know.
(Luis Velarde/The Washington Post)

Navy officials said that the deployment was expected to involve [*counternarcotics operations*](#) in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific and that the stop in Guantánamo was to have been a brief visit to refuel and stock up on provisions. The ship arrived in Cuba on Dec. 20.

The Milwaukee deployed from its home port in Mayport, Fla., on Dec. 14. In a [news release](#) announcing the ship's departure, the Navy said that apart from the ship's crew, a detachment of Coast Guard law enforcement personnel was on board, plus an aviation unit responsible for operating embarked helicopters and drones. It was not immediately clear whether the coronavirus outbreak affected any of those passengers.

Photographs of the ship's crew, [distributed by the Navy over the past month](#), show some personnel wearing masks and others not. Meadows said Saturday that face coverings now are required for all, whether inside the ship or outside.

Navy vessels, where personnel live in tight quarters while at sea, are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus. The U.S. military's first major coronavirus outbreak occurred last year aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, sidelining the ship for several weeks in Guam after more than 1,000 personnel tested positive. The Roosevelt experienced [another run of infections](#) earlier this year.

U.S. military personnel are required to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, but [tens of thousands of troops](#) have resisted those orders. Across the Navy, about 9,000 sailors remained only partially vaccinated as of this week, according to [data maintained by the Pentagon](#).

Top Defense Department leaders are evaluating whether to begin mandating booster shots, as well, with public health experts saying an additional shot can help recharge waning immunity and ward off severe disease and hospitalization.