

1 Preserved Omicron Spike specific antibody binding and Fc-recognition across COVID-19 vaccine  
2 platforms

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21 **Abstract**

22 Despite the dramatic spread of Omicron globally, even among highly vaccinated populations,  
23 death rates have not increased concomitantly. These data argue that alternative immune  
24 mechanisms, beyond neutralization, may continue to confer protection against severe disease.  
25 Beyond their ability to bind and block infection, antibodies contribute to control and clearance  
26 of multiple infections via their ability to direct antiviral immunity via Fc-effector mechanisms.  
27 Thus, here we probed the ability of vaccine induced antibodies, across three COVID-19 vaccines,  
28 to drive Fc-effector activity against Omicron. Despite the significant loss of IgM, IgA and IgG  
29 binding to the Omicron Receptor Binding Domain (RBD) across BNT162b2, mRNA-1273, and  
30 CoronaVac vaccines, stable isotype binding was observed across all of these vaccines to the  
31 Omicron Spike. Compromised RBD binding IgG was accompanied by a significant loss of cross  
32 RBD-specific antibody Fc $\gamma$ -receptor binding by the CoronaVac vaccine, but preservation of RBD-  
33 specific Fc $\gamma$ R2a and Fc $\gamma$ 3a binding across the mRNA vaccines. Conversely, Spike-specific  
34 antibodies exhibited persistent binding to Fc $\gamma$ -receptors, across all three vaccines, albeit higher  
35 binding was observed with the mRNA vaccines, marked by a selective preservation of Fc $\gamma$ R2a and  
36 Fc $\gamma$ 3a binding antibodies. Thus, despite the significant to near complete loss of Omicron  
37 neutralization across several vaccine platforms against Omicron, vaccine induced Spike-specific  
38 antibodies continue to recognize the virus and recruit Fc-receptors pointing to a persistent  
39 capacity for extra-neutralizing antibodies to contribute Omicron disease attenuation.

## 40 Introduction

41 Antibodies represent the primary correlate of immunity following immunization with  
42 nearly all licensed vaccines (1), providing protection either via direct blockade of infection or via  
43 their ability to leverage the immune system to eliminate pathogens, should the pathogens breach  
44 the portal of entry (2). Emerging data from SARS-CoV-2 Phase3 vaccine studies clearly  
45 demonstrate a critical association between neutralizing and binding antibodies and protection  
46 against severe COVID-19 infection(3). Yet, the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern  
47 (VOC), including the Omicron variants, which evade neutralizing antibodies, has led to increased  
48 breakthrough infections globally among vaccinated individuals. Thus far, despite this striking rise  
49 in breakthrough infections, a concomitant rise in severe disease and death has not been  
50 observed, suggesting that vaccine mediated protection may still persist in the setting of a loss of  
51 neutralizing antibody activity, pointing to a potential critical role for alternative vaccine induced  
52 immune responses as critical modulators of disease severity, the ultimate goal of protection.

53 Beyond blockade of infection, cellular immune responses can directly or indirectly  
54 contribute to protection against severe disease. T cells may directly recognize and eliminate  
55 infected cells (4). In addition, binding antibodies with the capability of interacting with Fc-  
56 receptors (FcRs), found on immune cells, can leverage the antiviral activity of the innate immune  
57 system (5-9). This drives rapid opsonophagocytic clearance, infected cell cytotoxicity, or pro/anti-  
58 inflammatory mediators, etc. each of which have been linked to protection against several  
59 viruses including Influenza(10, 11), Ebola virus (12, 13), HIV (14), and most recently against SARS-  
60 CoV2 (6-8). However, whether Fc-activity persists to provide protection against Omicron, remains  
61 unclear. Thus, here we examined whether persistent Fc-activity could partially explain persistent  
62 protection against death following Omicron infection. Here we show diminished antibody isotype  
63 binding to the Omicron RBD across vaccine platforms, but persistence of robust Fc-activity to the  
64 Omicron Spike, which likely contributes to rapidly control and clear viral infection, thereby  
65 continuing to attenuate disease severity.

## 66 **Results**

### 67 **Loss of Omicron RBD recognition across vaccine induced immunity**

68 Despite the significant loss of vaccine induced neutralization against the novel Omicron  
69 VOC, persistence of vaccine induced antibody binding may continue to confer protection against  
70 disease via additional extra-neutralizing antibody functions that have been linked to natural  
71 resolution of infection and vaccination (6-8). Thus, we probed the persistence of vaccine induced  
72 antibody isotype binding to the recombinant receptor binding domain (RBD) across VOCs of the  
73 SARS-CoV-2 Spike antigen (Figure 1A). Persistence of RBD recognition was compared using  
74 plasma samples from 3 vaccine platforms, including the Moderna mRNA-1273(15),  
75 Pfizer/BioNtech BNT162b2(16), and Sinovac CoronaVac (17), all profiled at peak immunogenicity  
76 (see methods).

77 Comparable IgM responses were observed across all vaccine platforms to the RBD from  
78 D614G (WT), Alpha (B.1.117), Beta (B.1.351), and Delta (B.1.617.2), with a significant loss of  
79 Omicron (B.1.529) recognition by all three platforms (**Figure 1A**). mRNA vaccines induced stronger  
80 IgA RBD-specific cross-VOC responses, that were compromised, but not completely lost for  
81 Omicron. Moderate IgA responses were observed across RBD VOCs following CoronaVac  
82 vaccination, that recognized the Beta and Omicron variants to a lesser degree. Robust IgG  
83 responses were observed for mRNA vaccines, that were relatively stable across VOC RBDs,  
84 including a decrease, but not complete loss of recognition of the Omicron RBD. As expected,  
85 CoronaVac induced lower IgG responses across VOC RBDs, that also exhibited diminished binding  
86 to the Omicron RBD. These data point to the persistent, albeit lower, recognition of the Omicron  
87 RBD across isotypes by specific vaccine platforms.

88

### 89 **Persistent recognition of Omicron Spike across vaccine platforms**

90 While most neutralizing antibodies, that block viral infection, target the Spike antigen on  
91 or proximal to the RBD (18), Fc-functional antibodies that drive clearance or killing of virus or  
92 infected cells can target the whole surface of the Spike antigen. Thus, we next profiled isotype  
93 recognition across Spike VOCs (**Figure 1B**). All vaccines induced Spike-specific IgM responses  
94 across most VOCs and exhibited attenuated but not significantly reduced binding to the Omicron

95 Spike. Cross-Spike VOC IgA responses were most robustly induced by the BNT162b2 and mRNA-  
96 1273 vaccines, but exhibited a partial decline in recognition of the Omicron Spike. Conversely,  
97 the CoronaVac vaccine elicited lower IgA responses across Spike VOCs that were completely  
98 preserved to Omicron. Moreover, BNT162b2 and mRNA-1273 mRNA vaccines induced the  
99 highest levels of cross-Spike VOC IgG binding, which exhibited only a moderate loss of recognition  
100 of the Omicron Spike. Interestingly, despite the lower overall IgG titers induced by the CoronaVac  
101 vaccine, IgG responses recognized the Omicron spike identically to the wildtype spike, pointing  
102 to robust preservation of Spike IgG immunity across the 3 vaccine platforms.

103

#### 104 **Variable Omicron-specific Fc-receptor binding activity across vaccine platforms**

105 The ability of antibodies to leverage Fc-effector functions depends on their ability to  
106 interact with Fc-receptors (FcR) found on all immune cells (19). Thus, we profiled the ability of  
107 vaccine induced RBD and Spike-specific antibodies to interact with the four low affinity FcγRs  
108 found in humans, known to regulate and drive antibody effector functions (20). mRNA vaccines  
109 induced robust cross-VOC RBD-specific FcγR binding antibodies but exhibited a near complete  
110 loss of inhibitory FcγR2b and neutrophil specific FcγR3b binding, while preserving detectable  
111 opsonophagocytic FcγR2a and cytotoxic FcγR3a binding to the Omicron RBD (**Figure 2A**).  
112 Conversely, Spike-specific FcR binding persisted more robustly to Omicron (**Figure 2B**).  
113 CoronaVac induced intermediate levels of RBD-specific FcγR binding antibodies across VOCs, but  
114 exhibited a near complete loss of Omicron RBD-specific FcγR binding, despite the ability to bind  
115 to RBD (**Figure 1A**). These data point to qualitative differences in antibody Fc-binding capabilities  
116 that are not always linked to antibody titers. Conversely, although CoronaVac induced lower  
117 overall IgG levels of Spike-specific antibodies, which recognized the Omicron Spike comparably  
118 to the wildtype antigen (**Figure 1B**), CoronaVac Spike antibodies exhibited a more profound  
119 decline in Omicron-specific FcγR-binding (**Figure 2A**). However, a common pattern of Omicron  
120 Spike-specific FcγR-binding loss was observed across the three platforms, marked by a selective  
121 persistence of higher opsonophagocytic FcγR2a and cytotoxic FcγR3a receptor binding, and a  
122 sharper decline of inhibitory FcγR2b and neutrophil-activating FcγR3b binding. Thus, despite the  
123 significant complete loss of Omicron RBD-specific FcγR binding antibodies, the persistence of

124 robust levels of Omicron Spike-specific Fc $\gamma$ R2a and cytotoxic Fc $\gamma$ R3a binding antibodies likely may  
125 continue to recognize, control, and clear the virus following transmission thereby attenuating  
126 disease despite increases in transmission.

## 127 Discussion

128 As SARS-CoV-2 continues to evolve as it adapts to its new host, the virus has acquired a  
129 progressive collection mutations preferentially within the S1 domain of the Spike antigen, within  
130 or proximal to the receptor binding domain (RBD), aimed at enhancing Spike binding to the  
131 angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptor (21). Because many of the most potent  
132 neutralizing antibodies bind to the RBD, aimed at interfering or blocking interactions with ACE2,  
133 both vaccine induced neutralizing antibodies and monoclonal therapeutics have progressively  
134 lost neutralization potency against emerging variants of concern (VOC)(5, 22). Yet unlike previous  
135 VOCs, Omicron possesses more than 40 mutations, including 29 in the Spike protein, that, to  
136 date, represents the most profound escape from natural and vaccine induced neutralizing  
137 antibody activity. This loss of neutralization, coupled to enhanced ACE2-binding, accounts for the  
138 remarkable rise in transmission events globally. However, as a second line defense, following  
139 infection, both direct and indirect cellular mechanisms contribute to pathogen control and  
140 clearance. Specifically, T cells may directly recognize and kill infected cells (9). Additionally,  
141 antibodies able to leverage innate immune activity can both drive the rapid elimination of viral  
142 particles as well as deploy the cytotoxic power of the immune system to kill infected cells(19).  
143 While emerging data point to persistent COVID-19 vaccine induced T cell recognition of Omicron  
144 (4), it was unclear whether vaccine induced antibodies continue to leverage Fc-activity against  
145 this novel VOC.

146 Here we observed a more pronounced loss of Omicron-RBD compared to Omicron-Spike  
147 isotype/subclass and FcR binding was observed across vaccine platforms, likely linked to the  
148 preferential incorporation of mutations in the S1 domain of the SARS-CoV-2 spike. However,  
149 unlike neutralizing antibodies, that must target a limited number of regions on the Spike, involved  
150 in attachment, positioning of the RBD, or fusion, antibodies that mediate Fc-activity can likely  
151 bind across the entire antigenic surface. Fc-activity solely requires formation of immune  
152 complexes and arrangements of antibodies with Fc-domains that are accessible to local immune  
153 cells. The persistence of Omicron-IgG binding to the Spike antigen across the mRNA and  
154 inactivated vaccine platforms suggests that vaccine induced antibodies may continue to opsonize  
155 the virus and virally infected cells even after infection with of Omicron. Thus, while neutralizing

156 antibodies are likely to be key to blocking transmission, non-neutralizing antibodies able to  
157 leverage Fc-biology may contribute to persistent disease attenuation.

158         While the three vaccines maintained more robust binding to Omicron Spike specific  
159 FcγR2a, a selective loss of FcγR2b and FcγR3b was observed across the platforms. FcγR2b is the  
160 sole low-affinity inhibitory receptor in humans, likely involved in attenuated inflammatory  
161 activity (20). Likewise, FcγR3b is solely expressed on neutrophils, likely critical for rapid  
162 opsonophagocytic clearance of opsonized viral particles (20). While continued binding to FcγR2a  
163 and FcγR3a may lead to continued clearance of particles and killing of infected cells, the loss of  
164 FcγR2b and FcγR3b may result in a more inflammatory response, that may translate to symptoms,  
165 but may still attenuate severity and death. Likewise, emerging epidemiological reports suggest  
166 that Omicron infection, while less severe, causes mild to moderate symptomatic infection(23,  
167 24). However, real-world comparisons of symptom severity across vaccine platforms are needed  
168 to provide enhanced resolution of the roles of individuals FcγRs in attenuating disease.

169         While many developed countries have begun aggressive boosting campaigns, the majority  
170 of the world, where many variants may evolve, remains incompletely vaccinated. Thus,  
171 understanding the ability of distinct vaccines to drive immunity to Omicron is urgently needed.  
172 Moreover, defining the immunological mechanisms that contribute to disease attenuation, in the  
173 absence of neutralization, may provide key insights to guide effective pan VOC-vaccine design  
174 and boosting campaigns to help control the global COVID-19 pandemic. Here we demonstrate  
175 the persistence of Omicron Spike-, but reduced RBD-, specific binding and Fc-activating potential  
176 across vaccine platforms, providing some initial insights on persisting mechanisms that may  
177 contribute to disease attenuation despite the significant loss of neutralization to this novel SARS-  
178 CoV2 variant of concern.

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185 **Competing interests**

186 G.A. is a founder and equity holder of Seromyx Systems, a company developing a platform  
187 technology that describes the antibody immune response. G.A. is an employee and equity holder  
188 of Leyden Labs, a company developing pandemic prevention therapeutics. G.A.'s interests were  
189 reviewed and are managed by Massachusetts General Hospital and Partners HealthCare in  
190 accordance with their conflict of interest policies. All other authors have declared that no  
191 conflicts of interest exist.

192

193 **Data Availability Statement**

194 All data produced in the present work are contained in the manuscript

195

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218 to Emmes. Funding for the manufacture of mRNA-1273 phase 1 material was provided by the  
219 Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation.

220

## 221 **Methods**

### 222 **Study population**

223 To compare antibody responses elicited by the different vaccines, samples were obtained at peak  
224 immunogenicity timepoints from individuals who were vaccinated with the full dose regimen  
225 recommended by the respective manufacturer. As part of a phase 1 clinical trial in the US  
226 (NCT04283461) individuals received two doses 100 µg mRNA-1273 at days 0 and 28 and samples  
227 taken two weeks after the second dose. BNT162b2 vaccinated individuals received 30 µg  
228 BNT162b2 at days 0 and 21 and samples were taken two weeks after the second dose. Individuals  
229 from Chile received two doses 600U CoronaVac four weeks apart and samples were taken two  
230 weeks after the second dose. For the CoronaVac study informed written consent was obtained  
231 under protocol 200829003 which was reviewed and approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee  
232 at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC). This study was overseen and approved by the  
233 MassGeneral Institutional Review Board (IRB #2020P00955 and #2021P002628).

### 234 **Antigens**

235 Receptor-binding domain antigens for the wildtype (Wuhan), alpha (B.1.1.7), beta (B.1.351), and  
236 delta (B.1.617.2) VOCs were obtained from Sino-Biologicals. Omicron RBD was generously  
237 provided by Moderna Inc. Stabilized (hexa-pro) spike of D614G or respective variants was  
238 produced in HEK293 cells.

239

### 240 **IgG subclass, isotype and FcγR binding**

241 Antigen specific antibody subclass and isotypes, and FcγR binding was analyzed by Luminex  
242 multiplexing. The antigens were coupled to magnetic Luminex beads (Luminex Corp, TX, USA) by

243 carbodiimide-NHS ester-coupling with an individual region per antigen. Coupled beads were  
244 incubated with different plasma dilutions (1:100 for IgG2, IgG3, IgG4, IgM and IgA1, 1:500 for  
245 IgG1 and 1:1,000 for FcγR probing) for 2 hours at room temperature in 384 well plates (Greiner  
246 Bio-One, Germany). Unbound antibodies were washed away and subclasses, isotypes were  
247 detected with a respective PE-conjugated antibody (anti-human IgG1, IgG2, IgG3, IgG4, IgM or  
248 IgA1 all SouthernBiotech, AL, USA) at a 1:100 dilution. For the analysis of FcγR binding PE-  
249 Streptavidin (Agilent Technologies, CA, USA) was coupled to recombinant and biotinylated  
250 human FcγR2a, FcγR2b, FcγR3a, or FcγR3b protein. Coupled FcγR were used as a secondary probe  
251 at a 1:1000 dilution. After 1 h incubation, excessive secondary reagent was washed away and the  
252 relative antibody concentration per antigen determined on an IQue analyzer (IntelliCyt).

253

#### 254 **Statistical analysis**

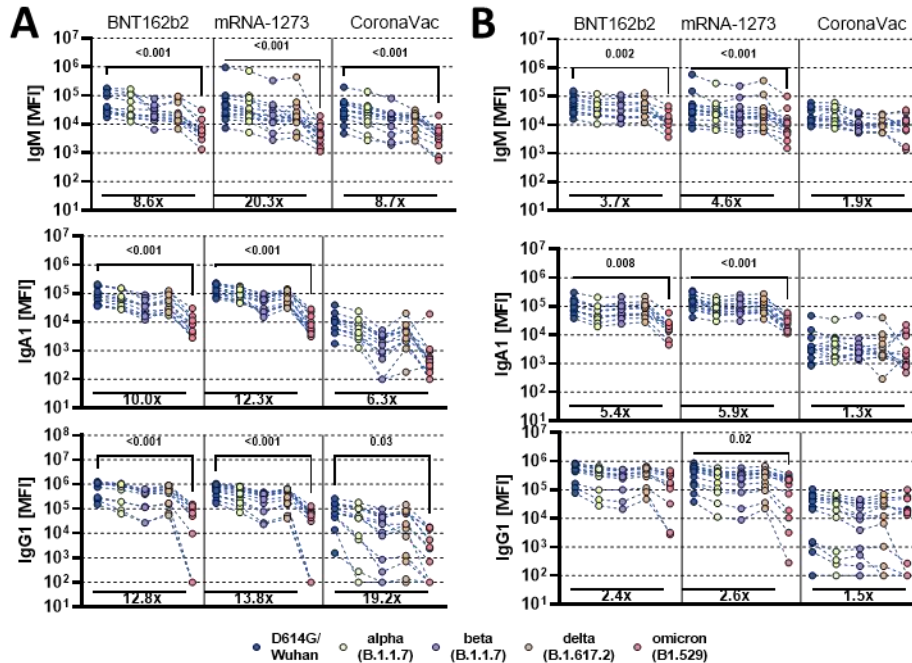
255 If not stated otherwise, we assumed non-normal distributions and plots were generated and  
256 statistical differences between two groups were calculated in Graph Pad Prism V.8. A Kruskal-  
257 Wallis test with a Benjamini-Hochberg post-test correcting for multiple comparisons was used to  
258 test for statistical differences between wildtype variant and omicron titer.

259

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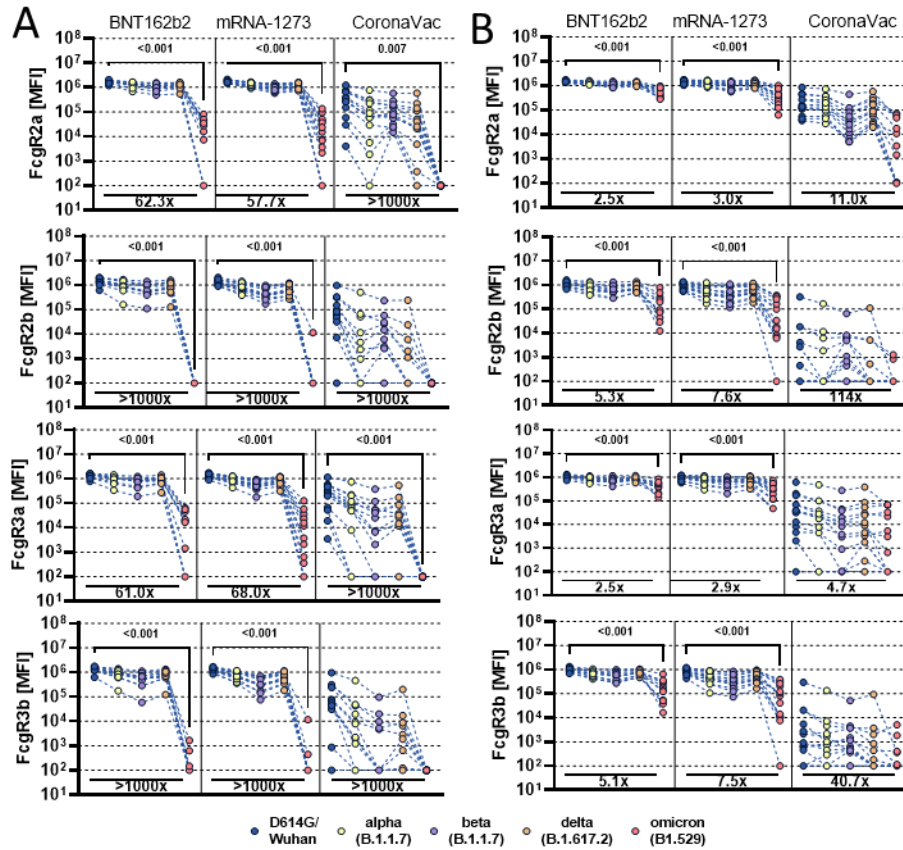


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323 **Figure 1: Vaccine induced antibody binding to different SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern.**

324 Individuals either received the full dose regimen of the BNT162b2(n = 11), mRNA-1273( n=14), or  
325 the aluminum adjuvanted inactivated particle vaccine CoronaVac (n=13). Samples were taken at  
326 peak immunogenicity 2 weeks after the last dose. IgM, IgA1 and IgG1 binding titers to D614G  
327 (WT), Alpha (B.1.117), Beta (B.1.351), Delta (B.1.617.2), and Omicron (B1.529) variants of concern  
328 receptor binding domain (A) or full Spike (B) were measured by Luminex. Background corrected  
329 data is shown and negative values were set to 100 for graphing purposes. A Kruskal-Wallis test  
330 with a Benjamini-Hochberg post-test correcting for multiple comparisons was used to test for  
331 statistical differences between wildtype variant and omicron titer. P-values for significant  
332 different features are shown above and fold change reduction of omicron titer compared to  
333 wildtype below each dataset.

334



335

336 **Figure 2: Vaccine induced Fcγ-receptor binding antibody profiles across SARS-CoV-2 variants of**

337 **concern.** Individuals either received the full dose regimen of the BNT162b2(n = 11), mRNA-1273(

338 n=14), or the aluminum adjuvanted inactivated particle vaccine CoronaVac (n=13). Samples were

339 profiled at peak immunogenicity 2 weeks after the last dose. Binding to FcγR2a, FcγR2b, FcγR3a

340 and FcγR3b of D614G (WT), Alpha (B1.117), Beta (B1.351), Delta (B.1.617.2), and Omicron

341 (B1.529) variant of concern receptor binding domain (A) or full Spike (B) specific antibodies were

342 determined by Luminex. Background corrected data is shown and negative values were set to

343 100 for graphing purposes. A Kruskal-Wallis test with a Benjamini-Hochberg post-test correcting

344 for multiple comparisons was used to test for statistical differences between wildtype variant

345 and omicron titer. P-values for significant different features are shown above and fold change

346 reduction of omicron titer compared to wildtype below each dataset.