The study was "far less alarming" than some suggest, tweeted virologist Stuart Neil of King's College London, emphasizing that the hybrid virus was less lethal than the original Washington state strain.

What are the counterarguments?

It was also tested in mice that are "exquisitely sensitive" to SARS-CoV-2 because they have been engineered so their lung cells are packed with the receptor that SARS-CoV-2 uses to break into human cells, Neil noted. The scientists forced a huge amount of virus up the noses of the mice, far more than a person would typically encounter. As a result, the mouse mortality rate of 80% was far higher than the human mortality from the original SARS-CoV-2 variant, which is about 1%.

Also reassuring, Neil noted, is that the experiments were conducted in a biosafety level-3 (BSL-3) lab, which has a series of sealed doors, negative air pressure cabinets, and workers in protective suits. That is just short of the safety precautions seen in the most secure BSL-4 laboratories, which are reserved for extremely deadly pathogens such as Ebolavirus.

Florian Krammer, a virologist at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, believes the experiment is less concerning because similar hybrid SARS-CoV-2 variants have already emerged naturally and later faded into the background. One such naturally emerging virus, for example, featured the Omicron spike protein on a Delta strain backbone. "Mother Nature did it already a while ago IN HUMANS and nobody cared," he tweeted.