

'Antivirals helpful, but vaccines the best defence'

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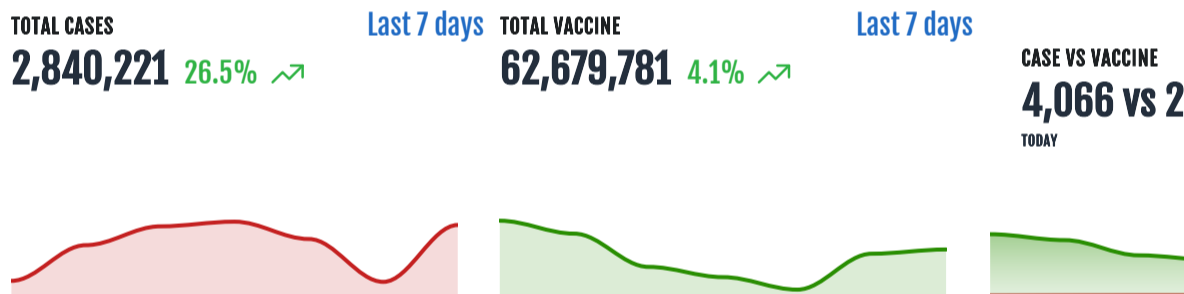
By [Nuradzimmah Daim](#) - November 7, 2021 @ 9:15am

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A handout picture courtesy of Merck & Co showing capsules of the antiviral molnupiravir. -AFP PIC

COVID VACCINATION



The antiviral pills to treat Covid-19, touted as a game-changer, may help the country save cost and ease the burden on the health system.

Virologist Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Lam Sai Kit said oral medications would help reduce the risk of severe disease, hospitalisation and death, besides leading to huge savings for the government's coffers.

He, however, stressed that vaccination was still the most effective protection against Covid-19, and hoped that more people take the vaccine and get their third dose where applicable.

"We must continue to adhere to health safety measures, such as wearing of face masks, maintaining physical distancing, and regular hand-washing, until we reach the stage where over 80 per cent of our total population, including children, are vaccinated.

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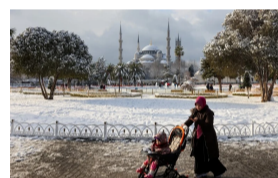
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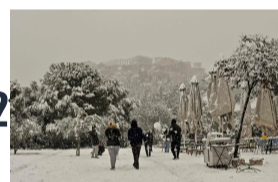
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Virologist Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Lam Sai Kit

"For now, the news about the availability of antiviral drugs is indeed exciting as we will have an additional tool to fight Covid-19," he said yesterday.

As with all antiviral drugs, he said, pills to treat Covid-19 infection must be given as early as possible to maximise effectiveness.

"We also would like to know whether these pills can be given to people who are yet to be vaccinated, young children, elderly people, and those with weakened immune systems or with co-morbidities to prevent infection if someone in their household tests positive for Covid-19.

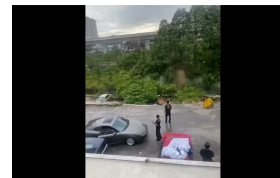
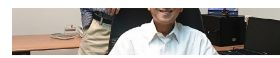
"Further trials are still ongoing to obtain larger data sets and new information," said Lam, who is research consultant at Universiti Malaya and senior fellow of Academy of Sciences Malaysia.

Former Malaysian Medical Association president Professor Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said it was too early to determine if the "miraculous" pill could become a game-changer in the fight against the pandemic.

"The results published have not been peer reviewed. Some drugmakers in India who have independently tested the generic molnupiravir have not confirmed any significant efficacy. The results of other trials on the drug are still pending.

"The Pfizer vaccine results have now received some bad press regarding their studies on the efficacy of their vaccines.

"Merck (manufacturer of molnupiravir) also has yet to release any detailed and reliable safety data about their drug," said the Melaka-Manipal Medical College professor of obstetrics and gynaecology.



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He said Covid-19 was not the first of the coronaviruses to impact human health in a serious way, as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) also did not get as much attention from researchers and scientists in the development of antiviral drugs, he said.

He said Covid-19 had uprooted the normal semblance of life and changed our way of living forever, pushing forward the urgent need to introduce antiviral drugs for Covid-19 due to the number of sheer mortalities and morbidities inflicted by the disease.

"While it may be welcome news that oral antiviral drugs may be used in this fight against the pandemic, it is to be noted that due to the urgent nature of the pandemic, researchers and scientists did not have much time to test the drugs.

"Long-term consequences cannot be ascertained at this stage.

"(For example), the thalidomide pill was found to be effective in initial studies to treat vomiting in pregnant women. Later, studies found that it is linked to thousands of birth defects in infants. This was only realised after the drug had been in use for some time," he said.

Dr Tharmaseelan also believed that the best protection was by getting the entire nation vaccinated first, with booster doses to be administered as per health protocol, while constantly pursuing long-term options for Covid-19 prevention and treatment.

"The pill at the moment can be an added option in the management of Covid-19. It is certainly not to replace the vaccines," he said.

With the limited data and information on the oral anti-viral pills for Covid-19, he said vaccinations along with booster doses and strict adherence to standard operating procedures (SOP) were still the best way to manage the virus and the pandemic.

It was earlier reported that the government had spent over RM1 billion on Covid-19 response, including the purchase of medical equipment and supplies, as well as special allowances for frontline workers, protective equipment and test kits.

On Friday, the United Kingdom became the first country to approve a pill to treat Covid-19 that could be taken at home.

Molnupiravir was developed by Ridgeback Biotherapeutics and Merck & Co.

It was reported last month that the government, through the Health Ministry, had signed a letter of undertaking to procure the antiviral drug.

Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin was reported as saying that the decision was made as a preparation to move into the endemic phase by adding new innovative treatment options for Covid-19, apart from vaccination and public health approaches.

"Research by Merck & Co found that molnupiravir decreases ward admissions by 50 per cent, while also being effective against virulent variants, such as Gamma, Delta and Mu," he was quoted as saying.

Meanwhile, Pfizer Inc's experimental antiviral pill to treat Covid-19, paxlovid, was reported to be effective in cutting the chance of hospitalisation or death in adults at risk of severe disease by 89 per cent.

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