

# 'Be mindful of coronavirus'

By [MARTIN CARVALHO](#)

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysians should mask up during the coming 15th General Election (GE15), which will coincide with a wave of the Omicron XBB subvariant, say health experts.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said the XBB subvariant had recently overtaken BA5, the previous dominant strain in Singapore.

"Campaigning for GE15 is expected to intensify once the candidates are announced on Nomination Day.

"Many events will be held around the country, which will attract large crowds.

"We advise those attending political events to take the necessary precaution, and face masks should be worn in crowded enclosed spaces," he said when contacted yesterday.

He said that there should also be a clear standard operating procedure (SOP) for polling day to protect vulnerable groups.

"It is important to note that the caretaker government is allowing Malaysians who are Covid-19 positive with mild symptoms to come out to cast their vote.

"The Health Ministry has given its proposals on how this can be done," said Dr Muruga.

Yesterday, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said Covid-19 infections due to the XBB subvariant were expected to rise in the next few weeks and the crest of the wave would coincide with GE15.

He strongly advised those taking part in the polls to wear face masks, particularly candidates involved in door-to-door campaigning or those attending large indoor ceramah.

On Saturday, Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said there were proposals to set up special lanes and rooms for Covid-19-positive individuals to vote.

The ministry has submitted its recommendations to the Election Commission (EC) to ensure that voting is conducted smoothly on polling day.

Medical practitioner Datuk Dr Kuljit Singh said wearing a face mask was a simple yet effective way of preventing the spread of the virus, particularly during campaigning.

“Wearing a mask is not something difficult to do when you balance the distress of getting Covid-19 and potentially spreading it to the more vulnerable or family members.

“Though not compulsory, some amount of self-responsibility is essential,” the Association of Private Hospitals Malaysia president said when contacted yesterday.

Dr Kuljit said most Malaysians were now more aware of the importance of wearing face masks, although it is not mandatory.

“Some 90% or more of Malaysians are still wearing face masks and this can be seen at malls on weekends.

“This a good sign,” he said.

However, he expressed concern over the possibility of a rise in infections due to the 10% who choose not to wear face masks.

On the proposal to provide a special lane and room for Covid-19-positive individuals to vote, Dr Kuljit said there must be a proper mechanism for its implementation.

Universiti Malaya virologist Prof Dr Sazaly Abu Bakar said it was a wise call to get Malaysians to don face masks, particularly those involved with the polls, in the coming weeks.

“I fully agree with the minister.

“The face mask must be worn by everyone, especially those who are having symptoms such as sore throat and headache,” he said when contacted yesterday.

He said the spread of the XBB subvariant was very limited at the moment but could change as election campaigns heat up nationwide.

“If left unchecked, GE15 could end up as the ‘superspreader’ event similar to what happened during the Sabah state election in 2020.”