

# KJ: Don't take it lightly

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Crowd situation during people balik kampung for raya haji at Terminal Bersepadu Selatan (TBS) in Kuala Lumpur. - SHAARI CHEMAT/The Star

PETALING JAYA: The upcoming super weekend will be an opportunity for travel and for families to reconnect across the country, but there is an all too real scenario of a sudden spike in Covid-19 cases.

Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said people should be vigilant during the Hari Raya Aidiladha holidays to avoid a similar increase in cases recorded during Hari Raya Aidilfitri, with 3,410.

He said more than 110 countries are recording an increase in Covid-19 cases due to the highly transmissible Omicron sub-variant BA.4 and BA.5.

“Don't take this situation lightly. Many around us who have not been infected with Covid-19 over the past two years are now infected. Wear a mask in closed and crowded place, practise TRIIS,” he said.

Health experts also feel that the number of Covid-19 cases in the country may be under-reported and the more contagious Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants of Covid-19 may already be spreading.

Universiti Malaya epidemiologist Prof Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said the number of Covid-19 tests in Malaysia had fallen to less than 30,000 per day (on July 2).

“With new infections now numbering more than 2,000 per day, the test positivity rate is also rising so I think the real number of new cases is probably much higher,” he said.

On Wednesday, Malaysia recorded more than 3,000 new daily cases, the first time this figure has been breached since April this year.

The country’s positivity rate has also inched higher and risen above 5% since mid-June.

As at July 4, the positivity rate is at 5.8%, with a total of 58,399 tests conducted. The threshold set by WHO for adequate testing is a 5% positivity rate.

Dr Awang Bulgiba said Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) has already found BA.2.12.1 and BA.5 in Sarawak.

“So, it (the Omicron sub-variants) is likely to be already here,” he said. Dr Awang Bulgiba said that according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the BA.4 and BA.5 both contain the mutations L452R, F486V, and R493Q in the spike receptor binding domain, which earlier variants do not.

“The UK, Portugal and South Africa have seen quite a number of infections caused by BA.4 and BA.5 but severe disease rates remain within manageable limits in those countries,” he said.

However, he said, there has not been sufficient data to show whether current vaccines offer the same effectiveness against BA.4 and BA.5.

“Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna both have got newer bivalent vaccines, which covers the original Covid-19 and Omicron variant, but these were created with BA.1 in mind so it is uncertain whether they will also offer the same protection against BA.4 and BA.5,” he said.

Dr Awang Bulgiba said non-pharmaceutical interventions or NPIs remain critical in protecting people against the Covid-19 virus, especially with the Omicron sub-variants.

Universiti Putra Malaysia epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said those with symptoms should get tested so that earlier prevention can be executed.

“In my opinion, testing may not be as many compared to during the earlier Omicron wave,” she said.

She warned that the Omicron sub-variants are highly transmissible and breakthrough infection is observed when there is waning of antibodies.

“Whether it can elude antibodies produced, laboratory studies showed the possibilities but clinical studies showed booster doses adequately produce protective antibodies.

“There is no evidence that the variants caused more severe infection, but the pattern of severe infection was observed in populations with high numbers of the elderly being infected,” she said.

She added that the ultimate concern depends on the impact of breakthrough infection and burden to the healthcare system.

“If the majority of infections remain milder, and our system is still protected and functioning well, the outbreak would still be under control,” she said, adding that people should remain vigilant.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai said with the experience gained for more than two years living with Covid-19, the country should be prepared.

“People should test when symptomatic and continue basic hygiene measures. Every new variant has a potential to cause new infections as there may be a lack of immunity to each succeeding variant.

“As long as Covid-19 does not cause a high proportion of severe disease and death, we have to live our lives normally but with vigilance,” he said.

Medical Practitioners Coalition Association of Malaysia president Dr Raj Kumar Maharajah said the country should be cautious of the new sub-variant.

“The (spread of the) new sub-variant is coming and we should be concerned because we do not know how severe it is going to be.

“It is better to be safe than sorry,” he said.