

# Now's not the time to relax SOP, say experts

NATION

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Next in line: Children accompanied by their parents waiting for their turn to receive a dose of the Covid-19 vaccine at the World Trade Centre PPV in Kuala Lumpur. — AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

PETALING JAYA: With countries around the world loosening Covid-19 regulations, should Malaysia go down the same road?

That's an emphatic "no" from health experts who believe that the country must wait at least until the Omicron wave, which has seen numbers hit over 20,000 cases per day, is over.

They warned against doing away with public health measures as the variant is highly transmissible.

Most recently, Singapore has simplified Covid-19 rules and no longer requires safe distancing in mask-on settings. It also plans to lift size limits for events such as weddings, religious services and funerals.

Countries like South Korea, Sweden, Denmark and even Britain have all relaxed their rules.

Malaysia, however, should not make the same mistake as countries which ended public health measures only to see a huge surge in Covid-19 cases, said public health expert Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

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“South Korea’s daily cases are now estimated to be around 90,000 per day. It has started providing a fourth dose of the vaccine for healthcare staff. We don’t want that to happen here.

“Sweden is recommending the same too as cases spiral,” she said, referring to recent news that Sweden wants people aged 80 and over to get a fourth Covid-19 vaccine shot.

On Feb 9, Sweden scrapped almost all of its pandemic restrictions despite warnings from experts.

On Singapore’s decision, Dr Sharifa Ezat said Malaysia could also look into simplifying its standard operating procedure (SOP) but public health measures such as wearing a face mask in enclosed spaces and limiting the size of gatherings should still stay.

“We should simplify our SOP to prevent confusion among the public and increase adherence.

“However, we should still require the wearing of face masks in enclosed spaces, including schools, workplaces and restaurants.

“There also needs to be a limit on the number of attendees, especially in enclosed spaces,” she added.

“This is because until Malaysia reaches the endemic status, it is important to control the rising number of cases, especially in Categories 3 to 5, as well as deaths, to reduce pressure on the healthcare system.”

Dr Sharifa Ezat added that cases were also rampant among children and although it was less severe, they could still be exposed to the risks of long Covid.

Prof Dr Moy Foong Ming of Universiti Malaya’s Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, Medicine Faculty, said the lifting of public health measures would depend on the Omicron wave and the Malaysian healthcare system’s ability to manage the situation.

“Once we are confident that the Omicron surge has stabilised and is on the downward trend, we could begin to simplify health measures.

“Mask wearing can be lifted in outdoor settings, but dining out will depend on the risk level of the individuals.

“If they are older, or have low immunity, they should limit the frequency of dining out and be cautious with who they dine out with,” said Dr Moy.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai said Malaysia should not look into removing public health measures such as social distancing any time soon as the Omicron wave had yet to peak.

“Once we reach the peak, the numbers will hopefully go down. Then, we can talk about further relaxations,” said Dr Koh.

**NATION**

He added that Malaysians had already been given certain relaxations such as being free to take part in social activities, religious functions, dining out at restaurants and gatherings with family and friends during festivities.

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