

# Experts warn of new Covid strains

## 'Faster transmission, more severe symptoms, even healthy persons affected'

By **DIYANA PFORDTEN**  
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

**PETALING JAYA:** With new Covid-19 variants emerging in the country, health experts have warned of the importance of keeping the number of cases low to prevent the spread of more transmissible and severe infections.

The Health Ministry has detected the South Africa B.1.351 Covid-19 variant in several cases in the country, although the source of transmission has not been identified yet.

As at last Saturday, a total of 21 locally-transmitted cases involving the South African variant had been detected.

"The South African variant contains a mutation that could allow the virus to elude some of the antibodies produced through vaccines," the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted on its website.

The South Africa B.1.351 Covid-19 variant shares some mutations with the United Kingdom's B.1.1.7.

As at April 15, Malaysia had five cases involving the UK variant.

The Health Ministry has reminded that both the UK and South African variants that have been detected in the country can be transmitted easily and quickly, although many scientific studies on the symptoms and effects of these variants are still ongoing.

The CDC revealed that in the United Kingdom, the B.1.1.7 variant of SARS-CoV-2 – the name of the coronavirus that causes Covid-19 – emerged with a large number of mutations.

"In January 2021, scientists from the United Kingdom reported evidence that suggests the B.1.1.7 variant may be associated with an increased risk of death compared with other variants.

"More studies are needed to confirm this finding," it said.

A survey by the UK Office for National Statistics earlier this year also found that those who were infected by the B.1.1.7 variant had a higher prevalence of developing



### How do coronavirus symptoms compare between the B.1.1.7 variant and the original coronavirus strain?

Symptom	Variant	Original strain
Cough	35%	28%
Fatigue/ weakness	32%	29%
Headache	32%	30%
Muscle aches	25%	21%
Sore throat	22%	19%
Fever	22%	20%
Loss of taste	16%	19%
Loss of smell	15%	19%

Source: Study by U.K.'s Office for National Statistics (ONS)

cough (35%), fatigue or weakness (32%), headache (32%), muscle aches (25%), sore throat (22%) and fever (22%) compared to those infected with the original strain.

However, those infected with the new variant were less likely to lose their sense of taste (16%) or smell (15%).

Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr Subramaniam Muniandy said besides the more common Covid-19 symp-

toms like cough, fever, fatigue and loss of taste and smell, a number of patients with the newer Covid-19 variants struggle with severe respiratory complications such as shortness of breath, chest pains or difficulty in breathing.

"These are an indication of oxygen deprivation. What is worrying is some of the newer variants are affecting younger, healthy individuals," he said.

Dr Subramaniam urged the public to avoid crowds, aside from practising the usual standard operating procedures.

"We should also cut down the time spent purchasing goods at the mall or bazaars to reduce risk. Risk of exposure increases when the number of people increase," he said.

Dr Subramaniam also encouraged people to still get vaccinated despite current data showing that available vaccines might be less effective against the newer strains.

"We should still get vaccinated as it may have some effect in preventing severe symptoms or in reducing the risk of death. We should be using all the tools we have available against Covid-19," he said.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) medical epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said while the symptoms of those developing new variants of the Covid-19 might remain the same, the mutation of the virus was likely responsible for causing the infection to be more transmissible.

"The mutation has caused changes in the virus's spike protein. Laboratory studies in South Africa using viruses grown in-vitro have demonstrated the presence of these mutations.

"One of the identified spike proteins has made the variant more resistant to antibodies triggered by a previous Covid-19 infection," she said.

Dr Malina suggested that apart from current SOP, there should be a stricter policy covering those coming into the country from abroad.

"The government's decision to increase the quarantine from 10 to 14 days, together with

the compulsory screening test, are appropriate moves to deter the spread of infection caused by the variants," she said.

She also said that based on the World Health Organisation, even though the evidence from both human clinical trials and laboratory tests suggests that some of the current Covid-19 vaccines may not work as effectively against the B.1.351 variant, the available vaccines still could protect against serious illness and death.

"Some of the vaccine manufacturers have pledged to improve the current product in order to keep up with changes of the strain circulating in the environment," she said.

UPM consultant clinical microbiologist Prof Dr Zamberi Sekawi said the different variants generally demonstrate similar signs and symptoms as the existing strains, but differ in severity and transmissibility.

"At the moment, it seems to be a trade-off between transmissibility and severity.

"We are seeing highly infectious variants but with reduced severity and more asymptomatic cases, which is more likely a scenario for the survival advantage of the virus.

"However, variants which are highly infectious and virulent can occur. That's why we need to keep the numbers of Covid-19 cases low," he said.

Dr Zamberi also said that current vaccines were still effective against the new variants, but at a reduced level.

"Scientists are monitoring vaccine effectiveness. If it is found to be significantly less effective against these variants, the vaccine has to be updated.

"Updating vaccines is not a new thing, we do it annually for flu vaccines," he added.

Assoc Prof Dr Mohd Ghows Mohd Azzam, Science Adviser to the Science, Technology and Innovation Minister, also reiterated that some of the new variants found in the country can spread faster and make some vaccines less effective.

"The way to prevent the spread of the new variants is still the same, which is to isolate and quarantine and maintain SOP," he urged.