

## FUTURE BOOSTER DOSES

# 'COVID SHOTS COULD BE COMMON LIKE FLU JABS'

The science is not clear but giving extra doses to the vulnerable could help, say experts

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(From left) Dr Malina Osman, Dr Sanjay Rampal and Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud.

**C**OVID-19 boosters in Malaysia are likely to become as common as flu shots have become in the West.

Public health expert Dr Malina Osman said this also was likely to happen all over the world.

The former Health Ministry official said she understood the hesitation of academics that the "science on the fourth booster that was still out there", but from the policymakers point of view "it is better to be safe than sorry".

"The ministry needs to protect the high-risk groups. They cannot face another breakdown in health services that they faced for a year from the end of 2020 until August to September last year."

Questions about the future of boosters come as Malaysia follows in the footsteps of countries such as Singapore and the United States by introducing a second vaccine booster shot for the elderly, senior citizens with comorbidities and immunocompromised children aged 12-18.

Dr Malina, who is an associate professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, said it was crucial to administer boosters to the 10 million Sinovac vaccine recipients.

Studies suggest that many of those who received a two-dose regimen of the Sinovac vaccine did not have sufficient immunity beyond three months of the second dose, and require a third shot from an mRNA vaccine made by Pfizer or Moderna, or two shots of the vaccine by the China drug-maker.

However, the scientific community is divided over whether there is sufficient data to support another booster dose, and if additional shots was a sustainable public health policy since protection against infection wanes.

Epidemiologist Dr Sanjay Rampal told the *New Straits Times*

that periodic Covid-19 vaccine boosters might be something to consider for high-risk groups in the future.

"However, the vaccines should be updated to cover current variants, such as what is done with the influenza vaccine. In addition, we don't know of the appropriate interval period for such an intervention.

"If the last booster was within six months, I am unsure what the benefits would be.

"In addition, the science behind a second booster using the current vaccines is also non-definitive.

"There is little benefit with boosters now if you were infected during this Omicron wave."

Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry Covid-19 Epidemiological Analysis and Strategies Task Force chairman Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said the elderly and the immunocompromised might benefit from a fourth dose although the length of protection was uncertain.

He said while Covid-19 vaccines were effective at providing a little extra protection from infection, including against the dominant Omicron variant, endless boosting might not be viable.

Dr Awang said there was limited evidence to support a fourth vaccine shot.

"It seems that the protection afforded by boosters is simply by sheer levels of circulating antibodies rather than via an Omicron-specific version of the vaccine.

"This is not a sustainable public health strategy as we cannot keep administering boosters every six months or so or every time a new variant crops up.

"The advent of XE and other variants, for example, do not warrant boosters unless evidence emerges that these variants are

more virulent than their predecessors.

"Not only will repeat boosting be costly, but it is unclear whether this will prove detrimental to the immune system."

Dr Awang Bulgiba said a recent study that had yet to be peer-reviewed found that the T-cell response after a booster remained robust, which offered hope that a fourth dose was not necessary for most people.

"T-cell immunity protects against severe disease. So, although the Omicron variant may be able to evade some antibodies, robust T-cell immunity can help the body fight off the Omicron variant in vaccinated persons."

He said people under 50 should get their first booster and not rush into the second booster, as the fourth dose should be withheld until a more virulent variant emerged.

The general population, he said, should also continue with non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as face mask wearing, physical distancing and sanitisation to protect against symptomatic infection.

"Boosting with a fourth dose now when infection rates are declining also does not make public health sense. However, we really should not be looking at antibodies alone. Cellular immunity is more important here as the protection tends to be longer-lasting and is against severe disease and death, rather than against symptomatic infection.

"If someone has had a third dose (first booster) and then was infected with Covid-19, then there is no rush to get a fourth dose as it is likely that the antibody levels will remain elevated for a few months and, more importantly, the cellular immunity has been shown to last much longer than that." **Additional reporting by Caroline Gan**