

Not the right time to unmask

Health experts oppose dropping the mask mandate

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysia should practise caution and avoid rushing to drop the mask mandate, say health experts.

While going mask-free can be allowed in non-crowded places outdoors, Malaysians are better off wearing masks for a while longer, especially when in places with poor ventilation, they said.

"I see no reason to rush into removing the mandate on mask usage," said Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai.

Despite Malaysia's high vaccination rate and low number of severe Covid-19 infections, he said, we should be careful considering the upcoming Hari Raya Aidilfitri holidays when travel and home visits are expected to be high.

"We have seen a rise in Covid-19 cases in countries which stopped the mandate on mask-wearing prematurely.

"We have been doing relatively well in managing this phase of the pandemic. We should exercise caution.

"We should continue wearing our masks indoors, especially when there are many people, and on public transport as well as in crowded places where ventilation is poor.

"Masks should also be worn when visiting the elderly as well as those ill with comorbidities," he said in an interview yesterday.

Dr Koh also reminded Malaysians to keep adhering to the standard operating procedure (SOP) for now.



"Being able to travel for the holidays is already a boon by itself even if we need to continue wearing masks for a while longer.

"We may look at allowing masks to be (taken) off outdoors where we are not surrounded by many people and in places with good ventilation.

"The mandate can be revisited after the Raya holidays if Covid-19 cases are still under control then," he added.

Medical Practitioners Coalition Association of Malaysia president Dr Raj Kumar Maharajah also feels that the mask mandate should remain for the time being until the situation stabilises.

"Things are very fluid. Nothing is certain and we don't know when a new variant is going to come up and we can get infected anytime.

"It might be a fatal variant, so I think until things are stable, we'd

be better not take our masks off," he added.

He said the Covid-19 case count cannot be used as an indicator to gauge whether the situation has stabilised, as case loads tend to rise when new variants emerge.

"When the new variants are not as fatal as previous ones, when everybody has got their booster dose and when Covid-19 becomes more or less like the common flu, then we can remove our masks and lead normal lives again.

"But it is uncertain whether new variants will emerge and it could be a risk not to have masks on in such a situation," he said, adding that vulnerable groups will also be at risk if the mask mandate is lifted.

Instead of a blanket lift of the mandate, Dr Raj Kumar said, the mask requirement can be relaxed in certain circumstances, such as at functions and gatherings where there are not too many people and everyone has received their booster shots.

Universiti Putra Malaysia epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina

Osman concurred that it is still not time to go completely mask-free.

"Based on current infection rates, vaccination and intensity of transmission, it would be safer to keep the mask on in certain conditions, such as in crowded places or when we are in confined areas," she said.

She noted that people can be allowed to be mask-free in non-crowded public areas.

"It is also advisable for the elderly and those who haven't completed their vaccination to maintain the mask," she added.

Malaysian Public Health Physicians' Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said while it is time to review and loosen some SOPs, we should still be cautious and follow those in certain risky places or events.

"Masks are still necessary for vulnerable groups such as children and senior citizens who are not vaccinated or have underlying health issues," he said.

For others, said Dr Zainal Ariffin, the time has come to review the mask mandate.

"It should be relaxed in public places like open areas, malls, markets and outside of classrooms, but not in a closed area with many people and poor ventilation, such as inside a classroom or building."

Infections are on a downtrend and Malaysia has a high vaccination rate and post-infection immunity, he added.

"Also, we observe that loose compliance in the community now does not cause high infections or clusters.

"So, it is technically and socially appropriate to relax the mask mandate. It can be anytime from now," he said.