

'RIGHT TIME TO RELAX COVID RESTRICTIONS'

But using face masks in some places may still be necessary, say experts

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PUBLIC health experts believe that while the time is right to relax certain Covid-19 restrictions and standard operating procedures (SOP), the same cannot be said of face masks.

They believed that while MySejahtera check-ins and Covid-19 testing could be relaxed, the wearing of face masks could not yet be completely abolished.

Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman, a public health expert (epidemiology and biostatistics) from Universiti Putra Malaysia, said a government decision to loosen the SOP on face masks, MySejahtera check-ins and Covid-19 tests is appropriate.

"In my opinion, looking at all indicators of pandemic management, including current vaccination coverage, the decision on these three items is appropriate and justified.

"We have observed a constant decrease in the number of cases,

hospitalisations and deaths in the past five to six weeks. There is a high number of active cases due to the Omicron variant, but it did not have any impact on the public healthcare system.

"In terms of infection transmission, the intensity has been reduced very much. Despite there being more and more social interactions in the community, we found that not many clusters have been recorded," she told the *New Straits Times*.

She added that the government should, however, consider maintaining the face mask ruling, depending on the situation.

"For face masks, specific rules in certain conditions, like confined spaces, crowds and high-risk groups, should be maintained and clearly documented.

"For others, similar steps like those in other countries can be considered," she said.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, on Saturday, said the government was mulling over easing the use of face masks, MySejahtera check-ins and Covid-19 tests.

Fellow epidemiologist Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said it was timely to review and loosen some



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items in the SOP.

"This is because new infections are on the downtrend, coupled with high immunisation coverage and relatively high post-infection immunity in the community.

"Also, based on the observation and experience from other countries, it is technically and socially appropriate to review and loosen the SOP.

"It can be done anytime from now," he said.

On face masks, he said the mandatory ruling should be lifted in public and open air places.

"However, maybe it is still necessary to wear a face mask in closed and poorly ventilated places, like

classrooms, houses of worship and buildings.

"It could be optional depending on the venue or event. Let the owners or organisers set the rules.

"It is advisable that the high-risk groups — senior citizens, people with comorbidities, chil-

dren with health issues and those unvaccinated — still put on their face masks at all places."

He, however, encouraged everyone to continue following the SOP at risky places and events.

Alliance for Safe Community chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye said the government should not remove the face mask ruling just yet, as the country was not completely out of the woods.

"Some say that having worn masks for the past two years in public places, it is time to do away with this restrictive apparel.

"But the important question is this. Have face masks kept most of us safe during this devastating pandemic? The answer has to be a resounding yes.

"There is enough reason not to continue using them when we are completely out of the woods. But we are not. We are still within the danger zone," he said.

He said the government should learn from other countries, where

new variants surfaced when they let their guard down.

"We cannot afford to have a similar situation here, especially as we are beginning to open our economic sectors, and are in a celebratory mood over Hari Raya.

"Face masks have so far kept us safe, so let's leave it in the statute books, at least for a while longer or until the coast is clear.

"We have used the masks for some time now, and continuing to wear them in crowded places will not hurt.

"It will not hurt us and will not hurt others, but not wearing the masks may hurt us all."

Lee said while it remains necessary to wear face masks in crowded places, it would be difficult to monitor all public places where people congregate to celebrate the holiday season.

"Let each of us be ever mindful of our discipline and responsibility to ourselves, to our loved ones, to our community and to our nation."



Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman



Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar