

'Omicron XE on its way'

Experts predict the new variant could reach M'sia within a month

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PETALING JAYA: Even as the country's daily Covid-19 cases are on a downtrend, there is every possibility of the Omicron XE variant reaching our shores within a month, and posing a new danger.

According to Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman, the current Omicron variant arrived in Malaysia within a month or two even when the country's borders were closed.

In view of this, Dr Malina predicted that Omicron XE could arrive much faster as it has been detected in Thailand, Taiwan and the United Kingdom.

"For the Omicron XE, theoretically it can arrive faster compared to the current Omicron variant, but we hope our surveillance can help to limit the spread," she said when contacted yesterday.

First detected in the United Kingdom on Jan 19, the Omicron XE variant, a mutation of the Omicron BA.1 and BA.2 strains, is said to be 10% more transmissible compared to the current variant.

Dr Malina said there was no indication that the Omicron XE variant was causing severe infections like the Delta variant, but noted that the risk was high for those who have yet to be vaccinated, or had no previous infection.

However, she believed that the situation would be under control as the country had good vaccination coverage, good adherence to protocols, and measures in place for travellers to limit the spread.

"What we have to focus on now is to ensure coverage of vaccines among those aged five to 11, booster shots to achieve coverage of at least 70% to 80%, and provision of specific care for children less than five-years-old as well as those unable to be vaccinated," she said.



Daily reminder: Experts noted that authorities should be on guard and increase surveillance as the Omicron XE variant is 10% more infectious compared to the current strain. — AZMAN GHANI/The Star

Volunteers for Community Engagement and Empowerment For Covid-19 chairman Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar also predicted that the new variant would arrive in less than a month due to higher domestic and international movements.

He said that continuous testing and variant identifications must be carried out, adding that the country's healthcare system would be able to handle a surge in cases, as more than 99% of the cases are from Categories One to Three.

"It is still resilient and robust," he said.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's consultant clinical microbiologist Prof Dr Zamberi Sekawi concurred, saying that the variant might enter the country at a much faster rate as the borders had reopened.

However, he said this variant would have to compete with the existing Omicron variant to be the dominant variant.

"According to reports, this variant is 10% more infectious," said Prof Zamberi.

He added that not much was known about the Omicron XE variant in terms of its severity, and whether it could evade the vaccines.

"If the character of this variant is the same as Omicron, then our healthcare system will be able to cope," he said, adding that authorities had to be on guard by increasing surveillance, not just for foreigners, but also locals.

The country first saw a surge in cases, hospitalisations, as well as deaths when the Delta variant hit the country last July.

On July 14, Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said the Delta variant, first detected in India, was the dominant variant in the country then, with cases hitting a peak of 22,642 cases on Aug 25.

Subsequently, as cases fell, the country experienced another surge in cases at the beginning of January this year, which Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin had warned that the Omicron variant wave had begun in the country.

The Omicron variant was first reported in South Africa on Nov 24, 2021, and Malaysia detected its first Omicron variant case on Dec 2, 2021, involving a 19-year-old South African private university student in Ipoh who arrived from South Africa through Singapore on Nov 19.