

She got Covid-19 four times

This psoriasis patient is more vulnerable to infectious diseases due to her immunosuppressed state.

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LIU Wei Zi certainly has had her share of bad luck this year after testing positive for Covid-19 four times in quick succession.

The 24-year-old operations consultant had to quarantine herself in March, May, July, and most recently last month, when all her PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests came back positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

She shares how her second infection was the worst of them all.

"I had all the symptoms at the time and I felt like I was going to die. It was definitely the worst experience compared to the other times.

"And right after my quarantine, I had the worst cramps I've ever experienced as soon as I got my period," she says.

She believes that her four bouts of Covid-19 are due to her immunosuppressed status.

"I went on a trip to Port Dickson with my friends. And among the seven of us, only I got Covid," she shares.

Back in February 2021, Liu was diagnosed with psoriasis after a few red patches appeared on her skin, especially her legs and hand.

Her dermatologist prescribed her methotrexate, along with some steroid creams and one session of phototherapy, which involves exposing the skin to ultraviolet light.

"Phototherapy was like magic. My skin cleared up in the span of two days," she says.

However, she was still required to take the methotrexate pills on a regular basis as there is no cure for psoriasis, and the treatments available are aimed at controlling the



Liu's four positive Covid-19 PCR results within a span of nine months this year. — LIU WEI ZI



While Liu is thankful her skin condition is under control, a part of her is slightly sad as she is now more vulnerable to infections, compared to others her age, due to her medication. — CHAN TAK KONG/The Star

symptoms.

Methotrexate, which is also used to treat cancer and rheumatoid arthritis, works by slowing the abnormally rapid growth of skin cells in psoriasis.

However, it also has the effect of suppressing the immune system, making the patient vulnerable to infections.

Universiti Putra Malaysia Teaching Hospital medical officer Dr Jayaganthan Manauagar notes that immunosuppressed people are generally considered a high-risk group as they are prone to catching infections easily.

The doctor who is currently in training for a Masters in internal medicine says: "The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes Covid-19 is an air-

borne virus that spreads very easily, hence, it directly increases the possibility of infections to those high-risk groups."

According to consultant infectious diseases physician Datuk Dr Christopher Lee, those who are immunosuppressed also respond less to vaccines.

"Those in this category are more likely to get infected, and when they do get infected, they are also more likely to have severe disease.

"To be fully vaccinated against Covid-19, they actually need three shots in the primary vaccination series, instead of two," says the adjunct professor at Taylor's University School of Medicine.

Besides getting all the recommended shots, it's important for

those who are immunosuppressed to practise good infection prevention measures like physical distancing, wearing more protective face masks such as the N95, and practising good hand hygiene, he adds.

Indeed, although almost all of the restrictions enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic have now been eased, Liu is still being cautious and she encourages everyone else to be too.

"If you are sick, it is better for you to wear a mask to protect yourself, as well as the people around you.

"My friends and I still practise doing self-tests before meeting up, just to be safe," she says.

She also still religiously wears her face masks and takes good care

of both her physical and mental health.

With new Covid-19 cases still averaging above 1,000 every day, it is clear that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is still circulating among us.

And with the wearing of face masks and physical distancing no longer being enforced, everyone is still at risk of catching the disease.

Therefore, those in high-risk groups, e.g. people who have chronic diseases or are immunosuppressed, are advised by the doctors to continue taking the precautions to prevent themselves from getting Covid-19.