

# Ensure safeguards at entry points are airtight, govt urged

**PETALING JAYA:** The government has been urged to consider stricter measures to avoid a surge in Covid-19 cases as the country anticipates the entry of travellers from China, which is currently grappling with high caseloads.

Health experts say there may be some loose ends in the safeguards announced by the Health Ministry, which will be testing wastewater of aircraft flying in from China for Covid-19 and also imposing a fever screening on all travellers from abroad including from China, but not making Covid-19 tests mandatory on travellers from China.

Public health expert Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh said imposing Covid-19 tests on arrival for visitors from China would be a good

additional measure.

"The Health Ministry is using wastewater surveillance which can serve as a warning sign for the virus' presence but I feel that it's not enough and the passengers should do a RT-PCR test upon arrival.

"The sudden surge of cases in China is something we must be careful about and there may be a new variant of concern (VOC). The country has been known to be silent on some data so we do have to be careful.

"Certain countries have totally banned Chinese tourists as a precautionary measure.

"It's not something new for Malaysia to require a Covid-19 screening," she said.

The medical lecturer at Universiti

Kebangsaan Malaysia added that it could also be a good measure to track the movement of visitors from China to catch any cases that may turn up positive during their stay in Malaysia.

Dr Sharifa Ezat added that Malaysia's burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and the nation's ageing population means that extra care must be taken against the threat of the virus.

She also encouraged Malaysians to get boosted and mask up when attending large scale gatherings such as the New Year's celebrations.

Volunteers For Community Engagement and Empowerment For Covid-19 chairman Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said Chinese visitors should conduct an RT-PCR

test before entering Malaysia.

If positive cases are high, the government should consider restricting entry from China, he said, adding that tourists from the country must also have completed their vaccination and be boosted.

Dr Zainal Ariffin said there should be strict supervision and monitoring by the Health Ministry, with random tests being conducted at the international port of entry.

"The increasing level of awareness of Covid-19 in China is real and worrying.

"China has allowed its citizens to leave. This is like opening the floodgates and spilling cases all over the world.

"We are just about to get out of the pandemic completely. Immun-

isation coverage is high, but coverage for the first and second booster is still low and it is possible that the population's immunisation level is decreasing.

"Preventive practices are also getting looser," he said.

Dr Zainal Ariffin called for immunisation coverage of the first and second boosters to be increased, as well as self-screening and quarantine.

Public health expert Prof Dr Moy Foong Ming said the measures announced by Health Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa yesterday, which targeted international travellers for fever and testing wastewater from the planes were inadequate.

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## Detecting travellers with Covid-19 should also be a priority

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"As we know, checking for fever is not really effective in screening for Covid-19.

"There are asymptomatic Covid-19 patients or these patients don't experience fever. In addition, there are possibilities that the thermometer used may malfunction.

"Testing for wastewater will only provide information that there were Covid-19 positive patients in the plane and detect the virus variants but we will not be able to single out the Covid-19 patients," she said.

Dr Moy, who is with Universiti Malaya's medical faculty, suggested that the current measures can be implemented first and if all batches of wastewater are found to be Covid-19 positive, then the Health Ministry may consider asking for negative RT-PCR test results two days prior to departure or conduct random testing on arrival.

China, which has been closed to the world since 2020, will downgrade its Covid-19 threat levels on Jan 8 and start allowing mainland residents to travel abroad more easily.

According to the COVIDPoops19 website, which is an initiative by University of California, Merced, researchers to track global wastewater monitoring efforts, some 70 countries have conducted this method of surveillance.

This includes India, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, the United States, Canada, India, Hong Kong and South Africa.

Universiti Putra Malaysia public health expert (epidemiology and biostatistics) Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said the current measures announced by the Health Ministry are relevant to curb possible new emerging outbreaks.

"The Health Ministry has initiated continuous monitoring without stopping. With updated procedures and advice on vaccines, we hope our population is protected from the possible new wave of infection.

"In addition, I would also recommend that we conduct mandatory testing for all travellers coming from high-risk countries like what has been decided by other countries like the United States, Italy, Japan and India," she said.

Dr Malina said at the same time, vaccination for those who still need to be vaccinated should be done as soon as possible, and added that wastewater testing complements the continuous surveillance on human and clinical samples.

"This effort has been carried out for sentinel surveillance.

"The decision to do wastewater testing is not done suddenly, but has been in place for quite some time.

"As a complementary element in continuous surveillance, wastewater monitoring is important to detect possible emerging circulating strains in the country coming from China," she said.