

Coronavirus Variants/tighter measures

Don't let new variants deter you from getting vaccinated: Experts

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New variants of the virus that causes Covid-19 have recently caused some concern that they may evade the immune response

induced by existing vaccines, but there is no evidence yet of this occurring, said experts here, urging people not to hesitate over getting vaccinated.

“The more people who are vaccinated, the more who will be protected against current variants and, likely, new variants as well.” Sars-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, began mutating soon after it was discovered. The new variants were first identified in Britain (B117), Brazil (P1) and South Africa (B1351) appear to be more contagious. In pre-emptive moves, vaccine developers are preparing to modify their vaccines against these variants.

“There is no immediate cause for concern, as these new variants have not been shown to cause more serious illness,” said Prof Seet, who chairs an expert panel that looks at the science and technical aspects of Covid vaccines to determine which ones are better. “If the virus continues to mutate, there may be a need for second-generation vaccines or a booster. But it is really too early to tell.” For now, existing vaccines are not affected but many people remain hesitant about taking them. “Quite a number of people have asked me about the speed of development of the vaccines, and they are concerned that what normally takes five to 10 years is now compressed into a matter of months,” said Prof Seet.

But the unprecedented spread of the disease has led to an unprecedented response. “For a typical infectious disease, we’d be lucky to have a handful of companies trying to make a vaccine for it. What’s happening now is that there are more than 200 efforts globally,” said Prof Seet. The amount of funds that has poured into Covid-19 vaccine development is also “totally unprecedented in history”. Associate Professor Lim Poh Lian, who is also a member of the expert committee on Covid-19 vaccination, noted that “governments around the world were providing funding to the pharmaceutical companies to reduce some of that commercial risk because if you

make three movies all at one shot, and they all bomb, then you’ve just lost three times as much money”. “We favoured certain ones based on strength and science, how well designed the studies were, as well as the track records of the company.” The technology types that were eliminated early were DNA vaccines (because very little is known about them) and the live attenuated vaccines (because these could potentially worsen the disease if they are not properly manufactured or engineered), said Prof Seet. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine that is currently used here, the Moderna vaccine that Singapore has signed advance purchase agreements for and the Arcurus-Duke-NUS vaccine that is being trialled here are messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines, which carry instructions for cells to make a protein that triggers an immune response. “They are not entirely new because there are ongoing clinical trials for this vaccine for other viral diseases. It’s just that the compa-

Prof Seet said that the groundwork to get Covid-19 vaccines into Singapore started last April, when experts started looking at “seven or eight different types of vaccine technologies”. As more information came in, they whittled down the list. “We decided on a mix of traditional vaccine technologies – inactivated vaccines, protein subunits, as well as the new technologies involving RNA and viral vectors,” said Prof Seet. “We favoured certain ones based on strength and science, how well designed the studies were, as well as the track records of the company.” The technology types that were

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CURRENT VACCINES WORK

Existing vaccines work against the virus variants circulating in the community, so people should continue to step up to receive the vaccine. The more people who are vaccinated, the more who will be protected against current variants and, likely, new variants as well.

PROFESSOR BENJAMIN SEET, a member of the expert committee on Covid-19 vaccination.

nies very quickly adapted what they were doing for other diseases for Covid-19,” said Prof Seet. “They were viewed favourably also because they could be produced in large quantities early on, among other reasons, he said. And when clinical trials started, the mRNA vaccines as well as the viral vector vaccines were progressing very rapidly, making them very attractive bets. “The Pfizer vaccine, the one we have today, works extremely well. It’s an A-star based on Singapore’s PSLE standards,” said Prof Seet. “We are actually quite impressed with the safety profile.” Still, Prof Lim, who runs a travel clinic that gives out about 50,000 doses of vaccines every year, ac-

knowledges the nervousness that accompanies new things. “The head of the Travellers’ Health and Vaccination Clinic at Tan Tock Seng Hospital let on that she was very nervous about being among the first 40 National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) staff here to take the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at the end of last year. Prof Lim, who is also the director of the high-level isolation unit at NCID, said the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine’s phase three studies found that 14 per cent of the volunteers had developed a fever after the jab, and hence, there was a chance that at least five of the 40 would develop a fever after the jab. But none of them developed a

fever after that, though about 40 per cent of the group experienced a sore arm and some had other side effects like fatigue. Lasting around 24 to 36 hours, said Prof Lim. These side effects are a sign that the body is mounting an immune response to the vaccine. Long-term effects of the vaccine are rare, she said. Instead of weighing between getting a vaccine and not getting one, people should consider the risk of getting the disease, she said. “We know that it’s a matter of time before more and more people get infected, because the virus itself has asymptomatic infection.”

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3 UK strains detected at Tokyo hospital as US intensifies monitoring efforts

Signs that strains may be spreading in Japan as patients have not travelled abroad

TOKYO/WASHINGTON • Three new types of the British coronavirus strain, previously not detected in Japan, were discovered in patients at the Tokyo Medical and Dental University Hospital, according to a research group studying Covid-19 cases at the hospital.

None of the three patients infected with mutations of the British strain had travelled abroad, meaning there is a high possibility that the variants are spreading in Japan, the group said on Friday. The patients were hospitalised between November and last month, with two of the three experiencing severe symptoms. The new British strains had previously not been detected in Japan outside of airport quarantine areas, according to the researchers. Various strains have previously been found in Japan, including one discovered in four passengers arriving from Brazil earlier this month. A variant found in South Africa was also detected in Japan late last month.



People taking part in a mock inoculation exercise at a college gym in Japan’s Kawasaki city last Wednesday. In addition to the new British coronavirus strains, various others have also been previously found in Japan, including ones from Brazil and South Africa. PHOTO: REUTERS

Drug-makers say they are working on booster shots that could enhance the potency of their vaccines against the new mutations. A variant known as B117, spreading widely in Britain, has been detected in the US in 379 cases in 29 states as at last Wednesday. Another variant identified in Brazil has emerged in Minnesota, and one detected in South Africa has been found in two people in South Carolina, infections that officials do not believe are linked. The reported cases are likely just a glimpse of the number of variants spreading, because only a small fraction of patient samples get the genetic sequencing needed to identify the virus’ lineage. The emergence of virus variants is forcing companies that make the vaccines to develop boosters. So far, Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson have all said they

are in the process of developing booster shots or other approaches against the South Africa variant. In the meantime, it is now a race to vaccinate the world’s population before the South Africa and Brazil variants become more common or, worse yet, new mutations make the virus more resistant. The B117 strain is projected to become dominant in the US in late March or early April, said Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. He added that the virus mutations will require vaccine-makers to be “more nimble” to tackle new strains that may emerge. But he said he was most worried about the risk that some future variants might resist vaccines entirely. “You need to stay ahead of these mutants and essentially crush this outbreak.”



Medical staff workers prepare syringes with doses of Covid-19 vaccine behind bars at Fenway Park in Boston, Massachusetts. Fenway Park is opening as a mass vaccination site this week. PHOTO: AGENCY FRANCE-PRESSE

SENSE OF URGENCY By the time someone has symptoms, gets a test, has a positive result and we get the sequence, our opportunity for doing real case control and contact tracing is largely gone. We should be treating every case as if it’s a variant during this pandemic right now. DR ROCHELLE WALENSKY, director of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States.



The normally busy Rue de Rivoli in Paris on Tuesday, shortly before a pandemic curfew. Like other countries in Europe, France is taking tougher steps to fight back against new forms of the virus. PHOTO: NYTIMES

France tries to avoid Covid-19 lockdown with tighter border curbs

It will close large malls, impose virus tests for EU travellers, encourage working from home

PARIS • France will seal its borders for travellers coming from outside the European Union and close large shopping centres as part of a fresh set of measures aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19 and avoid a more draconian shutting down of the economy. The country is doing everything to avoid a lockdown, Prime Minister Jean Castex said on Friday. He urged more people to work from home and imposed virus tests for everyone entering France from within the EU, except cross-border workers. The spread of Covid-19 variants “is raising the risk that the pandemic will worsen”, he said, adding that France still has a chance to avoid a third lockdown. The new measures cap a week of speculation about whether President Emmanuel Macron would

take the plunge and tighten curbs after delaying a decision that would hurt an already battered economy and could prove politically costly, just 15 months before a presidential election. Mr Macron has been torn between pressure from doctors and researchers calling for a lockdown to prevent a surge in cases and deaths similar to the United Kingdom and businesses wanting to remain open to avoid collapse. Most countries in Europe are taking tougher steps to fight back new forms of the virus, with leaders warning that mutant strains will result in longer, possibly stricter lockdowns. The EU is counting on shops developed by Western drug-makers, but the pace of the drive is slower than expected and the bloc is embroiled in a supply spat with manufacturers.

The number of cases has risen in recent weeks along with the emergence of more virulent forms, putting pressure on the hospital system. Over 2,000 cases of new variants are being reported daily, or about 10 per cent of all cases, up from several hundreds early this month, said Health Minister Olivier Veran. Around 3,000 patients are in intensive care, a level comparable to October – when the second lockdown started and ended in mid-December – he said. Before the Covid-19 crisis, France’s capacity was 5,000 beds. While non-essential businesses have reopened, restaurants, cafes, bars, cinemas, theatres and sports venues have been closed since October. The latest rules taking effect today also shut large stores that do not sell food and ban travel to the country’s overseas territories except under extenuating circumstances. In Canada, travellers entering the country will have to quarantine in hotels at their own expense

and airlines are suspending flights to southern destinations, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said last Friday. New arrivals will have to pay to quarantine in hotels for up to three days under strict supervision, he told a news conference. Ottawa is stepping up Covid-19 testing while Canadian airlines have agreed to cancel flights to destinations such as Mexico and the Caribbean until the end of April. “Now is just not the time to be flying,” Mr Trudeau said. Italy, on the other hand, said it

would ease coronavirus restrictions across much of the country from tomorrow, despite warnings from health experts that the move was risky given concern over the spread of more contagious variants. After a review of the latest Covid-19 data, the health ministry said last Friday it was shifting 11 regions from orange to yellow zones, giving people there greater freedom to travel and allowing bars and restaurants to reopen during the day. BLOOMBERG, AGENCY FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

Indonesia, Malaysia log record highs in daily cases

KUALA LUMPUR/JAKARTA • Indonesia and Malaysia both logged new record highs in daily Covid-19 cases yesterday. Indonesia reported 14,518 new cases, to take its total number of cases to just over 1.06 million, the highest tally in South-east Asia. Its Covid-19 task force reported 210 deaths, increasing the death toll from the coronavirus pandemic so far to 29,728. Malaysia, meanwhile, reported its biggest daily rise in coronavirus cases for the second straight day, with 5,728 new infections yesterday. The new cases took the cumulative total of infections to 209,661. Malaysia reported 5,725 cases on Friday. Its Health Ministry also reported 13 new deaths, raising total fatalities from the pandemic to 746.

The country’s cumulative Covid-19 cases make it the third largest figure in South-east Asia, with the Philippines in the second grim slot with a total of 523,516 cases yesterday. Indonesia has vaccinated some 250,000 healthcare workers with their first shots since the programme started two weeks ago. The government is pushing for the number to rise between 900,000 and one million daily. Malaysia is slated to start its vaccination programme at the end of next month. Meanwhile, a Malaysian Cabinet minister said yesterday that the country is expanding its Covid-19 screening programme for foreign workers nationwide from Tuesday. Human Resources Minister M. Saravanan said the programme will involve 800,000 foreign nationals working in Malaysia and is focused on four “high-risk” states – Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Penang and Sabah – along with the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan. REUTERS, THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK



The partygoers who were arrested at the Three Sixty Bar on the resort island of Koh Phangan for violating curbs imposed under the national state of emergency declared in Thailand last March came from 10 countries, including the US, Britain, Switzerland and Denmark. PHOTO: SURAT THANI IMMIGRATION/FACEBOOK

Covid-19 rule-breakers pay the price

Arvind Jayaram Assistant Foreign Editor CANADIAN CASINO CEO OUSTED The unscrupulous chief executive of a Canadian casino firm thought he had successfully jumped the queue to get a Covid-19 vaccine jab for himself and his actress wife, but was forced to resign after quick-thinking locals discovered the ruse. Mr Rod Baker, 55, of the Great Canadian Gaming Corp – which is valued at nearly US\$2 billion (\$2.66 billion) – and his wife Ekaterina, 32, thought they would fly to the remote northern Yukon territory to be inoculated. The home to many indigenous people has a faster vaccination rate than the rest of Canada. The duo, who pretended to be

motel employees, were exposed when they asked to be taken to the airport straight after they were vaccinated in the small community of Beaver Creek, located on the border with the US state of Alaska. The Vancouver residents had flown there by private plane. The community has expressed outrage that the wealthy individuals received only a fine from the authorities, demanding jail time for the deception. Situated in a place that is five hours from the nearest major hospital, Beaver Creek residents are at a higher risk of death if they contract the virus. Mr and Mrs Baker also received a fine for failing to self-isolate for 14 days after arriving in Yukon. They were forced to walk back to the Beaver Creek airport after all of the town’s 125 residents refused to give them a ride.

THAI POLICE BUST PARTY When 89 foreigners gathered for an illegal party at a bar on the popular Thai resort island of Koh Phangan last Tuesday, they had little clue that the police also planned to arrive unannounced. Those arrested at the Three Sixty Bar for violating restrictions imposed under the national state of emergency declared in Thailand last March came from 10 countries, including the United States, Britain, Switzerland and Denmark. Also arrested were 22 Thai nationals, including the owner of the bar on the island situated in southern Thailand. The event was intended to celebrate the bar’s fifth anniversary, with a 100 baht (\$4.45) entry ticket. Photographs distributed by the police after the raid showed the partygoers looking sombre as even

more grim-faced policemen – who had tracked the party on social media – took them into custody. Thankfully, almost everyone was wearing a face mask. The reckless foreigners are now facing up to two years’ imprisonment and a 40,000 baht fine, while the bar owner may also be slapped with a 100,000 baht penalty for violating the Communicable Disease Act. TAIWAN QUARANTINE-BREAKERS A Taiwanese man was fined a record NT\$3 million (\$947,420) for breaking his home quarantine at least seven times in just three days after returning from a business trip to mainland China. The resident of Taichung, in central Taiwan, was found to have snuck out of his apartment building to go shopping and have his car



Canadian casino firm CEO Rod Baker was forced to resign after he and his wife Ekaterina jumped the queue to get a Covid-19 vaccine jab by flying to a remote Yukon territory to be inoculated. PHOTO: EKATERINA BAKER/FACEBOOK

fixed, among other escapades. He got into hot water after one of his neighbours confronted him about leaving his home when he was supposed to be observing Taiwan’s mandatory 14-day quarantine after returning to Taichung on Jan 21. In addition to the fine, which is the largest imposed by the Taiwan government yet for the breach of coronavirus restrictions, the unnamed man was also ordered to pay NT\$3,000 per day towards the cost of his quarantine. The government has been compensating people with NT\$1,000 per day for the duration of their quarantine, but the man has been stripped of that entitlement. Taiwan has been lauded for its handling of the pandemic, including its tough enforcement of rules. That was also seen in the case of a Philippine migrant worker who wandered out of the room he was being quarantined in for eight seconds last November. The man was caught on CCTV by staff at the hotel in Kaohsiung City, and was then reported to the city’s Department of Health. He was fined NT\$100,000, translating into NT\$12,500 for every second he was outside the room. The Department of Health has issued a stern warning that people in quarantine should not be under the impression that they will not be fined for leaving their hotel room, no matter how long.

Advertisement for various health products including vitamins, probiotics, and turmeric. Includes product images and prices.