

Must-reads

**THE BIG STORY**  
MOM changes rule on retrenchment notification

Firms with at least 10 employees will have to notify the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) each time they retrench any staff from Nov 1, according to new requirements out yesterday. Currently, employers need to notify MOM only when they retrench five or more employees within a six-month period. **A1**



**WORLD**  
No quarantine for some going to HK from mainland

Hong Kong will resume quarantine-free travel in a limited way for people entering the city from mainland China and Macau as the pandemic stabilises. Non-Hong Kong residents who live and work in the mainland and Macau will be able to enter Hong Kong without undergoing compulsory quarantine at designated hotels. **A8**



**OPINION**  
Promise, perils of India's infrastructure goals

India's government has embarked on a programme to draw in private sector expertise, while replenishing its own coffers, as part of its plan to renew and expand the country's infrastructure. This could succeed, but only with the right safeguards in place, says associate editor Vikram Khanna. **A15**

**SINGAPORE**  
Condo management flagged for discrimination

The managing agent of Hillview Heights condominium, Savills Property Management, has been flagged by the Security Association Singapore for discrimination against non-Mandarin speakers and older workers in its tender for security services. **B1**



**SPORT**  
President hails S'pore para-athletes' showing

President Halimah Yacob has commended Singapore's returning Paralympians for their "remarkable achievement" in competing at Tokyo 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic. She hoped that the 10, including double gold medalist Yip Pin Xiu, will share their sporting journey and experiences with the community to inspire others. **B16**



**LIFE**  
Keeping alcohol use disorder at bay

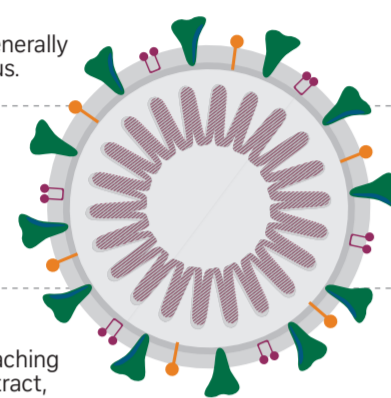
Alcohol use disorder is the second-most common mental disorder in Singapore, after major depressive disorder. But it is often left untreated, in part because patients are unaware they have a problem. The Straits Times takes a look at the signs and symptoms of alcohol dependence or addiction. **C162**

# What makes the Delta variant so contagious?

The Delta variant of Covid-19 arrived in Singapore in early April, and has since become the dominant strain circulating here.

**THE DELTA DIFFERENCE**

- More virus particles**  
People with the Delta variant generally emit larger quantities of the virus.
- Shorter incubation period**  
The variant has an incubation period of three to five days, compared with up to 14 days for the original "wild-type" virus.
- Better transmission**  
The Delta strain is better at attaching to a person's upper respiratory tract, helping it to spread more easily.



**DELTA BY THE NUMBERS**

- 5 DAYS** for viral loads in infected vaccinated individuals to decrease, meaning they recovered more quickly.
- 1.45** is Singapore's estimated Covid-19 reproduction rate at present, with safe management measures in place.
- 40%** is the estimated vaccine effectiveness in preventing infection by the Delta variant.
- 99.6%** of successfully sequenced Covid-19 infections at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases were of the Delta variant.
- 590** Covid-19 cases per month between January and August this year.
- 200** Covid-19 cases per month between February and December 2020.
- 5 to 8** is the Delta variant's reproduction rate as reported by the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

NOTE: One-third of the cases could not be sequenced because the genetic material was inadequate.



The Delta variant accounted for 99.6 per cent of the cases successfully sequenced by the NCID between end-April and the end of last month. PHOTOS: LIM YAQHUI, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

# Coronavirus: Singapore No time for complacency, even if you are jabbed: Prof Leo

**FROM A1**

to remember – that this virus can cause a very rapid surge of cases in the community."

Singapore has seen a spike in new infections over the past month, with several large clusters emerging at bus interchanges, migrant worker dormitories and a shopping mall.

Between February and December last year, the country had about 200 community cases a month, observed Adjunct Associate Professor Matthias Toh, director of the National Public Health and Epidemiology Unit at NCID. This figure went up to 590 between January and last month, driven in part by the highly contagious Delta strain.

The number of new cases in the community has since increased to 1,325 in the past week, compared

with 723 the week before.

On Monday, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong announced new measures to slow transmission and buy time for more people to get vaccinated.

This is because existing vaccines protect against severe illness, but do less well at preventing people from becoming infected, especially by the Delta strain.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung has also said that vaccines are about 40 per cent effective in preventing infection, with the strength of protection likely to wane several months after people have received their jabs.

Even so, every percentage point increase in vaccine coverage can translate to "significant benefits" in protection, especially for Singapore's seniors, said Prof Leo.

"So even though it's a last-mile effort to get to older individuals who have not got their vaccines yet, we should still try."

During the hour-long interview, the experts addressed a range of topics, including the transmissibility of the Delta variant and the impact vaccines have had on infection here.

Overseas research has found that the Delta strain has had an RO of 5 to 8, meaning that one person typically transmits the virus to between five and eight other people. This is around the same as chickenpox.

In Singapore, the RO is estimated at 1.45, taking into account existing safe management measures, Prof Leo said, adding that this figure is significant.

The Delta variant is estimated to be more than two times as contagious as the original wild-type. This means the RO would increase significantly if safe distancing measures were removed.

NCID treated about 1,100 community cases admitted between end-April and the end of last month, sequencing as much genetic material as it could.

Two-thirds of the cases were successfully sequenced, with researchers finding that 99.6 per cent of the cases in this group were caused by the Delta variant. The remainder were not sequenced because the genetic material collected was inadequate.

As a general rule, unvaccinated people who contracted this variant developed more serious symptoms than those who caught the wild-type last year, Prof Leo said. There were also more severe



**The Heroes Of Our Time** painting in Zone 2 of the NCID Gallery, which chronicles the history of infectious diseases in Singapore. ST PHOTO: LIM YAQHUI

# Touching veggies at market could have led to spread: Study

People who contracted Covid-19 at Bukit Merah View Market and Hawker Centre in June typically had three things in common.

They were not vaccinated, did not wear their masks properly and tended to touch fruit and vegetables with their bare hands.

These were the findings of a National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) study on the market cluster, which had a total of 94

cases and saw all 182 market stalls closed for two weeks.

The cluster was Singapore's largest for some time, with smaller clusters subsequently emerging in neighbouring blocks. The Ministry of Health subsequently conducted multiple rounds of testing which covered more than 200,000 residents.

As part of the study, researchers interviewed people affected by the market's closure, including stallholders and customers, said Adjunct Associate Professor Matthias Toh, who is director of the National Public Health and Epidemiology Unit.

They zoomed in on the market outbreak because of the large number of seniors who frequent the area, and given that seniors have borne the brunt of the outbreak, added Professor Leo Yee Sin, NCID's executive director.

Naturally, people who spent less time in the market were also less likely to get infected. "That is a no-brainer," she observed.

"If you spend time in the epicentre, of course the chances of you getting infected will be higher."

The study's findings suggest that stallholders might want to consider pre-packaging their produce, added Prof Toh.

"People who are patronising the stalls could carry their own hand sanitiser and sanitise their hands before touching the fruit and vegetables," he said.

"After that, they can also clean their hands again. This will not only protect themselves, but protect the community as well."

In addition, those who are using non-surgical, reusable masks should

**GREATER EFFORT NEEDED**

**A lot of people feel that after vaccination, it is time to relax. Our message today is for people to stop complacency, even if they are vaccinated.**



**PROFESSOR LEO YEE SIN**, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

**Q** If we treat Covid-19 as endemic, can it be thought of in the same way as the common flu?

**A** No, it cannot. The knowledge of influenza – for instance, that flu viruses constantly change, so yearly vaccinations are recommended – has been built up over decades of scientific research.

**DON'T LET DOWN YOUR GUARD**

**We hope that people's behaviour does not change because they are vaccinated with two doses and think that they are Superman or Superwoman.**



**ADJUNCT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MATTHIAS TOH**, director of the National Public Health and Epidemiology Unit.

cases involving younger people in their 40s and 50s.

The good news: Even though more unvaccinated people required supplementary oxygen, fewer people died of the disease. This suggests early detection and intervention is key, she added.

Another silver lining: While both vaccinated and unvaccinated people have high viral loads, vaccination helps people to recover faster. Viral loads tend to decrease in the vaccinated after five days or so, Prof Toh noted.

But this is no reason to let down one's guard, Prof Leo stressed. "A lot of people feel that after vaccination, it is time to relax. Our message today is for people to know: There is no time for complacency, even if they are vaccinated."

Prof Toh added: "We hope that people's behaviour does not change because they are vaccinated with two doses and think that they are Superman or Superwoman."

For one thing, the virus is still evolving. Other countries have reported cases of a new "Delta plus" variant, while some genetic differences have been observed in the local Delta strain.

But Singaporeans cannot assume that this will always remain the case, Prof Leo said.

People can still get Covid-19 and spread the virus to others even if they are vaccinated and only mildly ill, she added.

Prof Toh said: "Go and see a doctor so we can put out the small fires – do not wait for the fire to become big."

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# Covid-19 may be endemic but it can't be handled like the flu

Singapore has been living with Covid-19 for close to two years now, and has said that it plans to treat the disease as endemic. Can it then be thought of in the same way as the common flu?

The Straits Times speaks to Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), to find out the answers to this and other questions.

**Q** If we treat Covid-19 as endemic, can it be thought of in the same way as the common flu?

**A** No, it cannot. The knowledge of influenza – for instance, that flu viruses constantly change, so yearly vaccinations are recommended – has been built up over decades of scientific research.

In contrast, Covid-19 is still a relative newcomer.

"Whether Covid-19 will also become a seasonal human coronavirus, we don't know," said Prof Leo. "It will possibly take a long time for us to observe the evolutions, to understand how this virus finally settles down in the human environment."

Right now, Covid-19 still needs to be studied step by step, she added.

"We do not know what other surprises are going to come in the future. And since we do not know, and this is a formidable virus, we don't let down our guard."

**Q** If I am fully vaccinated and interact only with other vaccinated people in everyday life, does it

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really matter if I get Covid-19?

**A** Yes, it does. This is because no one truly lives in a bubble.

While we may not come into direct contact with vulnerable individuals, we may encounter them on public transport, Prof Leo said. In addition, those we interact with may have vulnerable household members.

It is, therefore, important for everyone to continue exercising social responsibility, especially since the highly contagious Delta variant can cause an exponential increase in the number of cases. While most affected people are likely to be low-risk cases in that situation, Singapore will also see a proportionate increase in the number of higher-risk cases, Prof Leo noted.

"Once you hit a certain number, there is a lot of pressure in terms of medical care and things like that."

**Q** Can we all expect to get Covid-19 at some point in our lives?

**A** We will all be exposed to the virus at some point, perhaps unknowingly, Prof Leo said. But that does not necessarily mean we will be infected.

"I believe that some of that exposure will not translate into infection because I protected myself – by vaccines, or safe management measures, masks, hand hygiene and environmental cleanliness."

But at this point in time, there is not enough data to show how many people who have been exposed to the virus will get infected, she added.

Linette Lai



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, cutting a birthday cake to mark the NCID's second anniversary at the launch of the NCID Gallery yesterday. DPM Heng lauded the dedication and professionalism of healthcare workers at the NCID and in the wider healthcare community. ST PHOTO: LIM YAQHUI

# NCID launches gallery to educate the public on infectious diseases

**Cheryl Tan**

As Singapore transitions to an endemic stage of managing Covid-19, it remains important to continue educating the public on how to protect themselves in order to reduce the transmission of such infectious diseases.

This was at the heart of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases' (NCID) decision to launch a gallery showcasing how the centre has been built to manage both emerging and endemic diseases.

The exhibition also chronicles Singapore's history of infectious diseases since 1913, with a special section of the gallery dedicated to NCID's role in managing the Covid-19 pandemic.

The launch of the gallery is an extension of NCID's efforts to engage the community, and to educate the public about diseases that con-

tinued to pose significant risk to public health, the centre said in a statement yesterday.

Officiating the launch on NCID's second anniversary yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat lauded the dedication and professionalism of healthcare workers at the NCID and in the wider healthcare community.

He highlighted how the centre has collaborated with other partners throughout the crisis.

"We are now 20 months into the fight against Covid-19. NCID has led our efforts against the pandemic, working closely with the rest of our healthcare system... (Its) good work goes beyond the four walls of this building."

NCID's research has also revealed much about the Delta variant – such as its ability to continue silent transmission and evade pre-existing immunity.

From September last year to June this year, the centre has led or

Besides providing clinical care, its public health programmes have continued to make significant contributions even as the centre continues to battle the Covid-19 pandemic, Prof Leo noted.

For example, the National Tuberculosis Programme has maintained its contact-tracing operations throughout the Covid-19 period, with large-scale screening implemented when necessary.

She added that an outreach screening was conducted in Hougang in October last year after a cluster of four TB cases was detected at an HDB residential block. Over three days, the team successfully engaged more than 90 per cent of the households there.

She said: "It is timely to launch the NCID Gallery and take the time to reflect on the past experiences of managing other infectious diseases outbreaks. Sars-CoV-2 will not be the last. Through the NCID Gallery and our community space, NCID Cares, we hope to reach out to the community and together take on the challenges of battling infectious diseases."

The gallery will be open to the public from today. Its operating hours are from Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm. Admission is free.

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