

BE SENSIBLE

(People should) just be sensible about taking precautions about their health, not go to work or school if they are unwell and seek medical attention instead.



PROFESSOR PAUL TAMBYAH, president of the International Society for Infectious Diseases.

BE CONCERNED

We should be concerned because a large number of infections will impact healthcare services and also result in higher numbers of serious illnesses and deaths.



PROFESSOR HSU LI YANG, infectious diseases specialist at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

DO NOT BE CONSUMED BY ANXIETY

The current wave is what we should expect of endemic Covid-19, just like we see with endemic influenza and all the other common respiratory infections. There's no more reason to worry about the Covid-19 wave than about similar influenza waves in the past. But just because we should not be consumed by anxiety, it doesn't mean we should do nothing at all.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ALEX COOK, from the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

S'pore Covid-19 infections stable from Dec 12 to 17

Experts say current surge not a cause for concern, urge public to act responsibly

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

Covid-19 infections appear to have plateaued over the past week, from Dec 12 to 17. The seven-day moving average was 7,870 on Dec 12 and it went down slightly to 7,730 on Dec 17.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital (NUH), said: "It'll be a bell curve confounded by Christmas parties. You don't know if it's peaked until after it's peaked."

While the numbers remain high, experts say it is not a cause for concern, even though serious illness and deaths tend to lag infection figures. In the week of Dec 3 to 9, 763 people were hospitalised and 23 were admitted to intensive care units (ICU).

The Ministry of Health (MOH) is providing daily updates of Covid-19 figures from Dec 19 "to provide the latest information on the situation during this period of surge in cases".

Professor Paul Tambyah of NUH, speaking in his capacity as president of the International Society for Infectious Diseases, said there is no need for people to worry about the rising Covid-19 infection numbers. Instead, they should "just be sensible about taking precautions about their health, not go to work or school if they are unwell and seek medical attention instead".

On the other hand, Professor Hsu Li Yang, an infectious diseases specialist at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said: "We should be concerned because a large number of infections will im-



The Ministry of Health has said that public hospitals here are prepared to delay non-urgent surgery to keep beds free in case of a surge in Covid-19 cases and the demand for beds goes up. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

pact healthcare services and also result in higher numbers of serious illnesses and deaths.

"Everyone - including those at minimal risk of severe Covid-19 - should do their part in slowing down the transmission of the virus."

The MOH has said that public hospitals here are prepared to delay non-urgent surgery to keep beds free in case of a surge in cases and the demand for beds goes up.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, also from the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, and an expert in biostatistics and modelling, said the real number of people with Covid-19 is "many times more" than the numbers announced by the MOH, as most people with mild illness, even if they test positive, do

not see a doctor.

He added: "The current wave is what we should expect of endemic Covid-19, just like we see with endemic influenza and all the other common respiratory infections. There's no more reason to worry about the Covid-19 wave than about similar influenza waves in the past. But just because we should not be consumed by anxiety, it doesn't mean we should do nothing at all."

All the experts said people should be socially responsible and mask up in crowded enclosed places, even if they feel well, since the transmission of the virus occurs a day or two before symptoms appear.

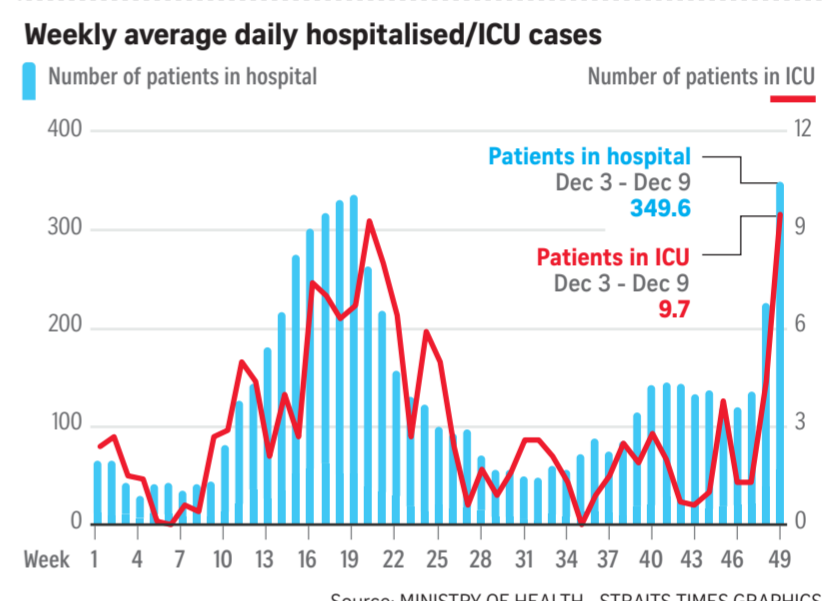
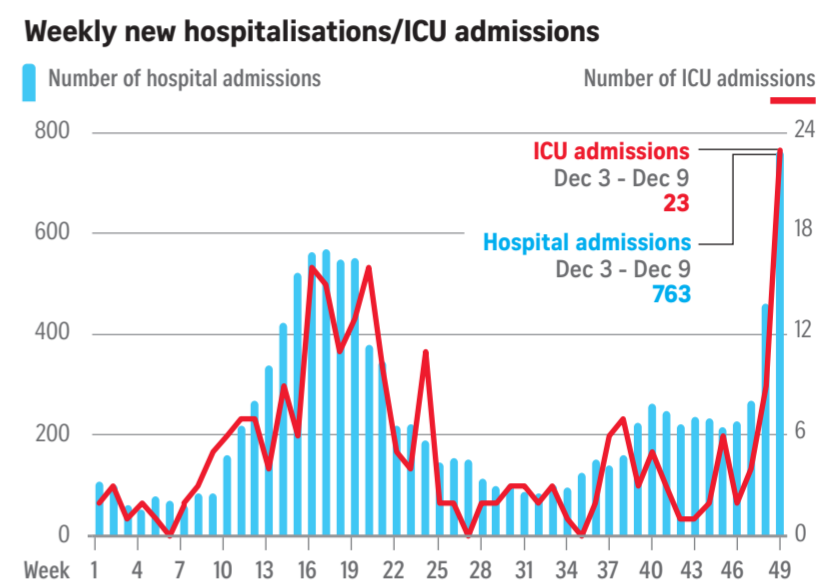
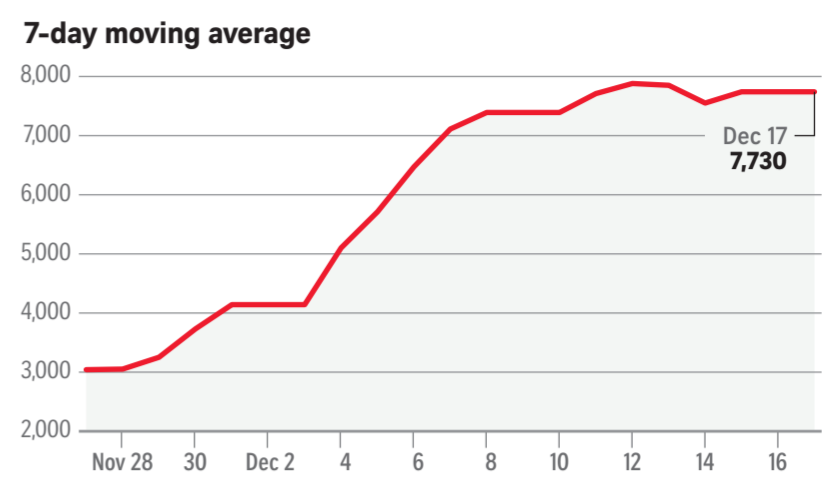
Dr Asok Kurup, an infectious diseases expert in private practice, said there is a need to play the game right with this virus and know what

the weakest links are. He said: "We have elderly and vulnerable people among us. In crowded and less ventilated settings, we should encourage mask-wearing to help mitigate cross transmission."

"It's too late to start mask-wearing only when symptoms start, as transmission begins earlier." Most of the experts said that the most important number is not how many people are infected, but how many need to be hospitalised or require intensive care.

Prof Tambyah said that while ICU case numbers may lag actual waves of infection for a week or two, they remain "the most objective indication of strain on the healthcare system" because "they reflect cases which objectively need ventilatory or circulatory support".

Latest Covid numbers in Singapore



Source: MINISTRY OF HEALTH STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

continue to the end of 2023 before plateauing and going down by early 2024.

Dr Shawn Vasoo, clinical director at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, said that while the absolute number of infections has increased, the severity of the infections has not gone up.

Nevertheless, he said those at higher risk of severe infection should get antiviral medicine from their doctor within five days of getting sick.

The drugs, such as Paxlovid and molnupiravir, "can substantially reduce the risk of hospitalisation and severe disease if started early", he said. These medications are free for Singapore residents.

He expects the current wave to salma@sph.com.sg

More support for mental well-being of police officers over the years

David Sun
Correspondent

As a police officer, he had to tell a woman that her husband was dead.

The distressing news left the woman hysterical, and it also affected the officer psychologically, triggering his own past trauma.

The officer soon found that he was unable to continue breaking such news to the loved ones of people who had died, which impacted his performance at work.

He sought help from the Police Psychological Services Department (PPSD), which then provided the necessary counselling and psychological resources for him to get back on his feet.

Speaking to the media during an engagement session on Dec 19, principal psychologist Ho Hui Fen, an assistant director at the PPSD, said the officer was later able to overcome his difficulties and handle the delivery of such news.

"In safe keeping and protecting the nation, police officers operate in a demanding and high-performing environment," she said.

"The PPSD has been providing morale and psychological well-being support to officers for the past 30 years."

Psychological services were first provided for police officers in

1993, but the Police Psychological Unit was officially formed only in 1996.

The unit started small, offering stress management training and counselling services. It evolved over the years into the PPSD, which provides support programmes, training and frameworks to build the resilience of officers.

The PPSD also has a counselling helpline to support officers who face problems in their personal lives or at work, including instances of workplace harassment and bullying.

Ms Ho said all conversations are kept confidential unless there is a risk of harm, so she was unable to share details about the cases handled by the PPSD.

She did reveal that one of the longest cases she handled spanned more than 11 years.

The PPSD also helps train para-counsellors - volunteers from within the Singapore Police Force (SPF) who are professionally trained in basic counselling skills to provide a listening ear to their colleagues when needed.

They volunteer for this role on top of their regular work.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner (DAC) Tay Wee Li, deputy chairwoman of the para-counsellor committee, said that para-counsellors are crucial in monitoring the mental well-being of officers.

She said: "Para-counsellors are essentially police officers for fellow officers. They provide peer support and counselling, and also render practical and psychological assistance during crisis or critical incidents to officers and their families."

There are now more than 460 para-counsellors in the SPF, compared with about 20 years ago, when there were just over 100.

DAC Tay said there is a large pool of officers who have applied to become para-counsellors, and while it is heartening, the committee and the PPSD have been selective.

She said this is because they need to ensure the officers are suitable for the volunteer role.

Officers who apply to become para-counsellors have to go through at least four rounds of checks and selections, including a psychometric test administered by the PPSD, before they receive professional training.

Public interest in the mental health and well-being of police officers has grown significantly since Sergeant Uvaraja Gopal, 36, was found dead at the foot of a block in Yishun in July.

Before his death, Sgt Uvaraja had put up a post on Facebook alleging racial discrimination and other issues at work.

Following his death, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said the circumstances sur-



Deputy Assistant Commissioner Tay Wee Li (left) and Ms Ho Hui Fen, assistant director at the Police Psychological Services Department, lead efforts in training and counselling to build the resilience of police officers. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

rounding Sgt Uvaraja's death would be thoroughly investigated.

The police also said they would be reviewing the allegations of workplace discrimination and re-

ferred their findings to the Attorney-General's Chambers for an independent review.

davidsun@sph.com.sg

Helplines

- MENTAL WELL-BEING**
- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
 - Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444 (24 hours) /1-767 (24 hours)/9151-1767 (24-hour CareText via WhatsApp)
 - Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
 - Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
 - Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
 - Chat, Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health: 6493-6500/1
 - Women's Helpline (Aware): 1800-777-5555 (weekdays, 10am to 6pm)

- COUNSELLING**
- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
 - TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers): 6804-6555
 - Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180
 - Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366

- ONLINE RESOURCES**
- mindline.sg
 - eC2.sg
 - tinklefriend.sg
 - chat.mentalhealth.sg
 - carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
 - limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)