

Not true that Omicron deadlier than flu, say Singapore experts

They respond to two overseas studies that say Covid-19 caused more deaths than flu

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

Covid-19 has not been shown to be more deadly than the flu, said local experts responding to two recent studies that say Omicron, while not as virulent as earlier variants, caused more fatalities in the last winter season than influenza.

Almost all Covid-19 infections today are caused by Omicron and its sub-variants.

The first study, by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), looked at more than 11,000 people who were hospitalised after confirmation of either Covid-19 or the flu, between Oct 1, 2022 and Jan 31, 2023.

The results, published online by the Journal of the American Medical Association on April 6, found that 6 per cent of Covid-19 patients died, against 3.7 per cent who had the flu.

The article said: "Compared with hospitalisation for influenza, hospitalisation for Covid-19 was associated with a higher risk of death. The risk of death decreased with the number of Covid-19 vaccinations."

The second study, by the Rabin Medical Centre in Israel, compared outcomes among 167 hospitalised Covid-19 Omicron patients and 221 patients admitted for flu in December 2021 and January 2022.

This study, which has not been peer-reviewed, was a special early release from the European Congress of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, which is meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, from last Saturday to Tuesday.

In this cohort, the mortality rate was 26 per cent for patients hospitalised with Omicron against 9 per



Experts agreed that Covid-19 vaccinations will continue to play an important role in reducing severe illness and death in older people and others who are vulnerable because of other illnesses they may have. Covid-19 is of particular interest now following news of a more virulent variant dubbed Arcturus. ST FILE PHOTO

cent of those with the flu.

Dr Alaa Atamna, who led the research team, said: "A possible reason for the higher Omicron death rate is that patients admitted with Omicron were older with additional major underlying illnesses such as diabetes and chronic kidney disease."

Covid-19 is of particular interest now following news of a more virulent variant dubbed Arcturus, which has caused a surge of infections in India. There was also a spike in infections here at the end of March.

In the week of March 26, the Ministry of Health (MOH) reported 28,410 Covid-19 infections – almost double the 14,467 reported the previous week. The number of cases over the previous three weeks was also higher than in the first two months of 2023.

However, that jump in cases did not presage a new wave of infec-

tions, as the number dropped to 16,018 in the week of April 2.

On the other hand, the number of flu cases has been increasing, with confirmed cases more than doubling each month – from 96 in January to 421 in March – based on the MOH monitoring of polyclinic cases, which is used as a yardstick for infection rates in the country.

Dr Asok Kurup, an infectious diseases specialist in the private sector, said: "I am personally seeing several cases of severe influenza infection requiring hospitalisation."

He said he has already seen about six older patients with severe influenza this year. There were also three younger patients, aged 17 to 33, who had to be hospitalised, though none needed intensive care.

Dr Kurup said the flu should not be trifled with.

"Not enough people are getting

UPDATED VACCINATION VITAL

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PROFESSOR LEO YEE SIN, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, noting that Covid-19 can be mild and inconsequential to younger adults, but can be severe in older people as there is an "age effect".

vaccinated, especially over the last few years. So the flu is back with a vengeance."

Professor Ooi Eng Eong of Duke-NUS Medical School, a medical doctor specialising in microbiology, said the two foreign studies were too short and not suited to compare the deadliness of the flu versus Covid-19.

He added: "Genetic drifts that occur over the course of months and even years in influenza viruses can give rise to strains with greater propensity to cause severe lung infection."

Professor Paul Tambyah, an infectious diseases specialist at National University Hospital, agreed with Prof Ooi that the studies were not designed to compare mortality rates, and that the severity of the flu bug varies from year to year.

He added that previous studies have shown that Singapore gets about 50 deaths a month from the

flu. The latest Covid-19 data from MOH shows there were 12 Covid-19 deaths in January and five in February.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the VA study showed mortality only among those hospitalised, and not of those infected.

He said: "It's not a like-for-like comparison, and I don't think that saying 'Omicron is more severe than flu' is warranted."

His colleague, Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, pointed out that the studies merely showed the number of hospitalised patients with Covid-19 or the flu who had died, and not that they had died of Covid-19 or the flu. Some patients may have been hospitalised for some other problem, but happened to be infected.

Said Prof Hsu, who is an infectious diseases expert by training: "My own take is that both are non-trivial illnesses in the elderly."

Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, said that whether there is a seasonal pattern or a predictable pattern for Covid-19 is uncertain as the virus is still evolving.

She said the disease can be mild and inconsequential to younger adults, but can be severe in older people as there is an "age effect".

"We have to do our part to protect our elderly and those vulnerable. Keeping an updated vaccination against the Sars-CoV-2 (virus) is critically important for the older population."

All the experts agreed that vaccinations will continue to play an important role in reducing severe illness and death in older people and others who are vulnerable because of other illnesses they may have.

Said Prof Ooi: "I think these studies strongly reinforce the notion that vaccination is critical for preventing severe Covid-19. How frequently booster vaccinations against Covid-19 are needed in the more vulnerable group really depends on the ongoing studies."

While Prof Hsu said he is not sure if vaccination is the way to go for Covid-19 the way it is for the flu, "perhaps this is the less harmful practice for the elderly as far as Covid-19 is concerned, until we have better data and evidence."

Added Prof Leo: "The mRNA vaccine is highly effective but it is limited in durability – to whom, when and how frequently to give booster doses needs further study."

salma@sph.com.sg

Safe management measures do not weaken immune system, says MOH

FROM AI

recover in a week or two, but it can be serious in infants and the elderly, resulting in bronchiolitis and pneumonia. There is presently no RSV vaccine proven to reduce infection, but there are quite a few being developed.

The current caseload of influenza, RSV and even Covid-19 infections, among both adults and children, has increased and cases of respiratory infections seem to have ticked upwards after "masks down" announcements were made – first in August 2022, and again in February 2023.

According to the Ministry of Health (MOH) website, average daily consultations at polyclinics showed an increase of between 2.8 per cent and 22.7 per cent week on week in cases of acute upper respiratory infections after both announcements. Also, general practitioners estimated a 20 per cent to 30 per cent increase in the number of patients with flu-like symptoms since late December 2022.

But Professor Paul Tambyah, a senior consultant at the Division of Infectious Diseases at NUH, said there is no evidence to suggest that the innate immune response "has been blunted by any of the measures used against Covid-19".

"The reality is that most of us have been exposed to a range of viruses since childhood, and thus develop an adaptive response which protects us from severe infection later on in life, but not always, as there are different strains of these viruses circulating, depending on geography," he said.

Dr Wan Wei Yee, a senior consultant at the Department of Microbiology at Singapore General Hospital, said that to get a true perspective on an actual "rise" in the cases of upper respiratory tract infection (URTI), "the number of reported cases in the week when the restrictions were lifted



Noah Fatrish, three, was hospitalised last Monday after his fever, which started on April 5, got worse. PHOTO: COURTESY OF IZYAN SHUBLI

needs to be compared with the same week in pre-Covid-19 pandemic years."

"This will indicate if there is a genuine increase in the baseline number of URTI. We may be just observing the 'normal' baseline trend in the number of URTI cases in the year. Building immunity can reduce the severity of illness and also accelerates recovery. There is

evidence that immunity does offer cross-protection against different strains of certain viruses," she added.

Although the MOH Weekly Infectious Diseases Bulletin shows that the number of cases in the pre-Covid-19 year of 2019 recorded at polyclinics was higher than in the corresponding weeks of 2022 and 2023 after the mask-

down announcements, the climb in the number of cases was not as steep.

For instance, average daily consultations at the polyclinics in the week of the masks-down announcement last August were 1,998. The figure rose 2.8 per cent to 2,054 a week later. But the number spiked to 3,514 six weeks after – a 22.7 per cent increase from the 2,865 daily cases the week before. This rise was mirrored in February 2023 when it was announced that masks were not needed on public transport.

The 2019 daily cases in corresponding weeks, although much higher, fluctuated only between 1 per cent and 7 per cent.

A spokesman for MOH said it routinely monitors a range of acute respiratory infection (ARI) indicators in the community and at hospitals, including polyclinic and emergency department attendances, and hospital admissions for ARI.

She said that under the National ARI Surveillance Programme, which monitors infection trends and the distribution of respiratory viruses in the community, a proportion of ARI cases at polyclinics is tested for a range of respiratory pathogens.

"Safe management measures (SMMs), including mask wearing, practised during the Covid-19 pandemic have helped reduce the transmission of Covid-19 and other respiratory infections. These measures do not weaken the immune system. The increase in the number of ARI cases, when compared with the period when SMMs were in place, is due largely to the resumption of social activity. The current average daily number of polyclinic attendances for ARIs has returned to pre-pandemic levels," the spokesman added.

Dr Leong said: "Without exposure, the level of antibodies falls. Without a Covid-19 year, repeated exposures to the same viruses, even without falling sick, would keep the antibodies up, and would confer significant protection and herd immunity. In other words, the best way to prevent infection by the same virus would be frequent exposure."

judith@sph.com.sg

Filipino helper's death after Covid-19 jab ruled a medical misadventure

Wallace Woon

The death of 43-year-old Filipino helper Ontal Charlene Vargas, four days after she received a booster dose of Covid-19 vaccine, has been ruled a medical misadventure.

Her cause of death, certified as myocarditis, was found by State Coroner Adam Nakhoda as likely to be related to the vaccination, said the Ministry of Health (MOH) in a statement on Sunday.

Myocarditis is inflammation of the heart muscle that can weaken and impede the overall function of the heart. The condition is a known side effect of the Covid-19 vaccination.

Madam Vargas had received her booster dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech/Comirnaty Covid-19 vaccine on Dec 9, 2021. The next day, she was hospitalised for shortness of breath and chest tightness.

She died on Dec 13, 2021.

A one-time financial assistance of \$225,000 was extended to Madam Vargas' family in the Philippines, MOH said. Her family had submitted an application under the Vaccine Injury Financial Assistance Programme in January 2023, with an independent panel assessing that her death was related to the Covid-19 vaccination.

This is the highest amount a person can receive through the programme.

Covid-19 infection is also known to be associated with myocarditis, several times higher than the incidence after vaccination.

Madam Vargas' death is the second related to Covid-19 vaccination locally, said MOH.

The first case was a 28-year-old Bangladeshi national who collapsed at his workplace and died of myocarditis on July 9, 2021, three weeks after receiving his first dose of the Moderna/Spikevax Covid-19 vaccine.

Under Singapore's National Vaccination Programme, more than 17 million doses of Covid-19 vaccination have been administered.

According to the Health Sciences Authority's (HSA) latest vaccine safety updates, the incidence of myocarditis remains rare, with reporting rates of 0.1 for every 100,000 doses for the bivalent vaccines, and 1.1 per 100,000 doses for the primary vaccination series of the monovalent vaccines.

MOH said available data suggests that most cases of myocarditis following vaccination are generally mild and respond to treatment.

Covid-19 infection is also known to be associated with myocarditis, several times higher than the incidence after vaccination.

Since September 2019, as a precautionary measure, MOH has advised vaccinated persons to avoid strenuous physical activity or exercise for two weeks after vaccination to mitigate the potential risk of myocarditis.

Those who experience chest discomfort, abnormal heartbeat or any other symptoms after vaccination should seek medical attention promptly.

This, MOH said, will enable early diagnosis and appropriate medical management of any rare severe adverse events that may occur after vaccination.

The ministry said that it will, along with the Expert Committee on Covid-19 Vaccination and HSA, continue to monitor vaccine-related serious adverse events closely.

wallacewoon@sph.com.sg