

Health experts warn about staying vigilant with new Omicron variant

By Dawn Chan - March 21, 2022



-NSTP file pic, for illustration purpose only.

KUALA LUMPUR: Irrespective of the Covid-19 variants that may emerge, people must continue to comply with coronavirus preventive measures to ward off potential infections.

Public health expert and epidemiologist Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar advised the people to remain vigilant despite the revelation Omicron BA.2 sub-lineage was not a widespread infection.

"It is natural for viruses to mutate, whereby for Omicron, there are already three sub-lineages which are BA.1, BA.1.1 and now BA.2.

"BA.2 is said to be higher in transmissibility and it is a distinct sub-lineage of Omicron. The Omicron variant will remain dominant globally.

"While the numbers of BA.2 cases are up, Malaysia must continue its surveillance and monitoring of the development of other new variants, including BA.

"There should be the assessment of clinical significance, severity and matched with epidemiology data," he told the New Straits Times.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah today revealed that they are keeping a close watch on the BA.2 lineage as cases spiked sharply.

Cases involving BA.2 had risen from 0.9 per cent to 2.7 per cent in January and February this year to 27.1 per cent from March 1 to 17.

Dr Noor Hisham expressed worry for the BA.2 sub-lineage as it may have higher transmissibility compared to the other Omicron sub-lineages as well as the Delta variant.

He added that as of March 20, there were no reports on the existence of the BA.3 sub-lineage in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman said it was early to say if BA.2 would cause more severe illness compared to the previous Omicron sub-lineages.

"Based on available data, I think we will have to wait for its real impact. The situation may be different from one region to another.

"At the moment, I think the Institute of Medical Research (IMR) is doing its best to provide the data. Currently, I feel that Omicron is the more dominant variant than Delta.

"The country should be cautious and we should be protecting ourselves from any potential infection," she said.

On Feb 24, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said the IMR was studying the BA.2 virus to determine its transmissibility and severity as reports were suggesting that it could be more serious than the original Omicron variant, BA.1.