

Masks 'must stay on for now'

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Tuesday, 12 Apr 2022



Multi-masking: Belinda Yeoh, 27, arranging face masks on shelves at Wellings Rock pharmacy in Jalan Macalister. — CHAN BOON KAI/The Star

GEORGE TOWN: Tempted to remove your face mask, just like residents in some countries that have eased up on Covid-19 rules?

Take it from Hospital Penang infectious disease unit head Datuk Dr Chow Ting Soo: wearing face masks is still vital in keeping Covid-19 at bay as the country has not reached the endemic phase yet.

She said a three-ply face mask would be good enough to prevent exposure to pathogens.

"Endemicity is when the population immunity is good, the healthcare system is manageable and there is the availability of intensive care unit (ICU) beds," she said, citing other factors such as newer vaccines targeting certain variants, or a fourth dose for vulnerable groups.

Starting March 29, Singapore began easing its Covid-19 restrictions, including optional mask use when outdoors and gatherings allowed for up to 10 people (instead of five) for mask-off activities.

Many have since asked whether Malaysia would follow suit, given its high vaccination rate and the number of Covid-19 cases on a downtrend.

To this, virology scientist Dr Muhammad Amir Yunus said infections involving the unvaccinated and boosted population was almost equal – 55 and 54 (per 100,000 population), respectively.

He said the statistics, based on a seven-day average as at March 30, showed booster recipients could still get the disease although the figure was relatively small.

The Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) lecturer, however, said wearing an ordinary three-ply face mask would prevent viral transmissions.

"Don't let your guard down thinking the worst is behind us.

"Although there has been a downtrend in Covid-19 cases, the public should pay heed to the number of cases involving the boosted population," said Muhammad.

He added that people should still put on their face masks to curb transmissions, especially in Ramadan bazaars and mosques.

"We are still not out of the woods yet although most of the adult population in this country is fully vaccinated."

Muhammad said he hopes the number of cases would continue to decline in the next few weeks.

USM virologist Dr Kumitaa Theva Das said with the virus still evolving, putting on a well-fitted face mask is important.

"Face masks are still needed," she said, noting the emergence of a new variant, Omicron XE, which is 10% more transmissible than the BA.2 variant.

"N95, KN95 and KF94 face masks are most suitable to protect against the new variant XE, and the Omicron variant, which makes up about 90% of the globally circulating variant.

"These types of face masks are better than wearing two layers of face masks (surgical mask plus cloth mask)," she added.

A check at several pharmacies showed there had been brisk sales of face masks and hand sanitisers.

Pharmacist Lim Chee Mun said there was no shortage of these items, which have become necessities, in Penang.

"They are just like food. People buy them every day," she said.

To ensure safety standards, the government said effective Jan 2 next year, manufacturers and importers of non-medical face masks must apply for MS Sirim certification and labelling from Sirim QAS International Sdn Bhd.

In reference to this latest requirement, Malaysian Community Pharmacy Guild president Foon Hwei Foong said she hopes it would not lead to a steep price increase.