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# Pi to arrive in May

Over the past few weeks, predictions that a fifth wave of Covid-19, driven by a new variant (Pi), will hit South Africa from May, have been widely reported in the mainstream media. At the recent South African Healthcare Summit (23 March), researchers said we should be prepared for a sixth wave, and even beyond. The good news is that with each new wave, the virus seems to be getting weaker and symptoms less severe – except in unvaccinated patients.

Addressing journalists at Rhodes University (Eastern Cape) on 10 April, Prof Salim Karim said Pi is going to spread even faster and will infect more people than Omicron. Prof Karim is director of the Centre for the AIDS Program of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA) and CAPRISA Professor of Global Health at Columbia University. He is also Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Adjunct Professor of Medicine at Cornell University, New York, an Associate Member of The Ragon Institute of Massachusetts General Hospital, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University.

Speaking at the Healthcare Summit, Dr Ridhwaan Suliman, a senior researcher at Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, as well as other speakers, said a sixth wave and more may be expected in future.

The virus will mutate the longer it stays with us, and Pi will outcompete Omicron as the dominant cause of infections in South Africa, said Dr Suliman.

"But while there may likely be higher

levels of infection, there are also higher levels of immunity in the country. So, we hope to see less severe outcomes of hospitalisations and deaths going forward."

He said that while it was possible for the next variant to be more severe and more transmissible, it was unlikely.

Underlying T cell immunity has been consistent across all the variants, explained Dr Fareed Abdullah, director of the Office of AIDS and TB Research at the South African Medical Research Council. The higher immunity levels in South Africa, through prior infections and vaccinations, bode well for less severe future waves.

"It would have to be a very, very unusual virus to end up with a scenario where the virus evades T cell immunity, and we haven't seen that yet," said Dr Abdullah.

It is therefore crucial that vaccination efforts are continued – especially among those who have opted not to be vaccinated. In countries with low immunity rates (eg Hong Kong), even Omicron proved to be deadly, warned Dr Abdullah.

Covid-19 patients under his care at

Steve Biko Academic Hospital (Tshwane), who need ventilation, are those who have not been vaccinated. If South Africa had achieved at least an 80% vaccination coverage rate by the time the fourth wave hit, Covid-19 deaths would have been a fraction of what the government reported during that wave, he stressed.

## Vaccination figures

Age group vaccination percentages released on 13 April by the National Department of Health were as follows:

- ✓ **60+ age group:**  
69.07% of the group vaccinated
- ✓ **50+ age group:**  
64.98% of the group vaccinated
- ✓ **35-49 age group:**  
52.93% of the group vaccinated
- ✓ **18-34 age group:**  
35.97% of the group vaccinated

In total, 49.05% of the South African population have been vaccinated. The World Health Organization estimates to achieve herd immunity would require around 80%-90% of the population to have Covid-19 immunity, either through prior infection or vaccination.

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## Breakdown per province

