

COVID-19

# No reason to panic over Omicron subvariant in SA

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SOME infectious disease specialists say there is no reason to panic about "Kraken", the XBB.1.5 Covid subvariant of Omicron.

The XBB.1.5 sub-lineage was first detected in October in the US and has since been found in South Africa in a sample collected late last month. The National Department of Health confirmed one person had contracted the subvariant in the country.

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) said in a statement that the XBB.1.5 subvariant of the Sars-CoV-2 virus might become the dominant strain in the country as US data showed that it has a "growth advantage" due to increased transmission.

It said due to the widespread circulation of other Omicron sub-lineages, and the overall high population immunity in South Africa, the introduction of XBB.1.5 may not necessarily result in a large wave of infections.

However, South African medical experts have said that despite being increasingly transmissible, the subvariant was nothing to worry about.

Bioinformatics scientist Professor Tulo de Oliveira said there were hundreds of Omicron subvariants and South Africa has had many since last year.

"Hospitalisation is highly unlikely even though it is more transmissible. People should monitor themselves for the symptoms, which are more or less the same as previous variants and avoid large gatherings," he said.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, a clinical infectious diseases epidemiologist, concurred with De Oliveira.

"We previously had five variants



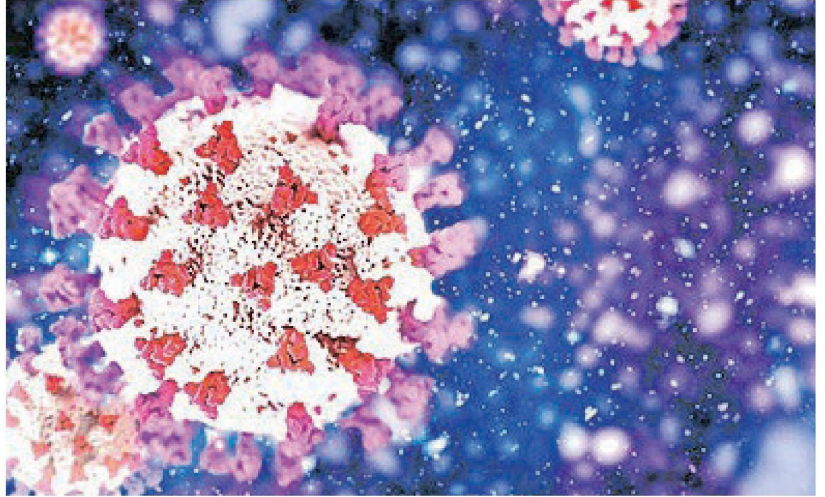
PROFESSOR Tulo de Oliveira of the Department of Virology and Infectious Diseases at UKZN says there is no need to panic over the new Covid subvariant named Kraken. | MOTSHWARI MOFOKENG African News Agency (ANA)

of concern but the XBB.1.5 subvariant is not one of them. It can escape antibodies and studies show that it can escape the antibodies used to treat Covid-19. We don't use most of those (treatments) so it won't affect us that much," said Abdool Karim.

He explained that the XBB.1.5 subvariant was different to the BE.7 Omicron variant in China.

"They (XBB.1.5 and BE.7 subvariants) are different versions (of Omicron) but they are related. There was a paper published that showed that if you have antibodies against BA.5, they remain effective against XBB.1.5. We had the BA.5 wave in May-June, which we had antibodies for so we are not overly concerned," said Abdool Karim.

He said terming the subvariant "Kraken", after the mythical sea monster, has created unnecessary



EXPERTS say although the XBB.1.5 subvariant of Omicron, known as Kraken, is highly transmissible, it is not to be feared. | SUPPLIED

hype. "The word 'Kraken' is just scaring people. We have immunity that would protect us. The subvariant is spreading mostly in the US.

"If people are concerned they can do three things: vaccinate with at least three doses and if they haven't vaccinated in the last six months then take one now, stay outdoors as much as possible and if you have to be indoors, especially in a poorly ventilated building, then use a mask," he said.

Richard Lessels, an infectious disease specialist at the KwaZulu-Natal Research

Innovation and Sequencing Platform (Krisp), said XBB.1.5 is not expected to be any different to other Omicron subvariants.

With high levels of immunity, the country wouldn't expect to see a surge in severe cases, even if there was a rise in infections.

Minister of Health Joe Phaahla announced this week that the government had not made any changes to its public health response to the pandemic, and people were encouraged to receive the Covid-19

vaccine and boosters.

Foster Mohale, a spokesperson for the Department of Health, said: "We will implement a targeted approach to make an impact, including in schools.

"There is generally a low uptake of vaccines, but people do come, especially the adults and immunocompromised, for booster shots, because they know that they are more vulnerable and at higher risk of complications if they get infected. The bottom line is Covid-19 is not gone, it continues to claim lives," Mohale said.