

# SA Covid infections are down to mask up again as scary new

Three weeks after the mask mandate was lifted, Covid cases have not risen sharply, but the health minister says a mask mandate must remain available in case of future waves. By **Estelle Ellis** and **Aisha Abdool Karim**

As virologists around the world express concern about a new Covid subvariant known as “Centaurus”, which is thought to be extremely transmissible, with the potential to cause more severe disease, some of the 10 affected countries are reminding people to get vaccinated because the pandemic is not over.

BA.2.75 has been detected in 10 countries, including India, the UK, the US, Australia, Germany and Canada, and it has been designated as a “variant under monitoring” by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

In addition to its rapid growth and geographical spread, virologists are on alert owing to the high number of extra mutations that Centaurus contains. The World Health Organization is closely monitoring the new variant. It has not been detected yet in South Africa, where, three weeks after the mask mandate was lifted, Covid-19 cases have not shown a marked increase and surveillance programmes are showing similar case numbers to the flu.

The Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand, Dr Shabir Madhi, said this week that the acute phase of the pandemic had passed and there was significant immunity against the disease in communities.

In other parts of the world, including parts of the US, the UK and Singapore, significant outbreaks driven by Centaurus and the BA.5 subvariant of Omicron have been noted in the past few weeks.



regulations remained in place, including a mask mandate, until permanent regulations could be promulgated. The promulgation of these permanent regulations, which many claimed was the result of a flawed public participation process, and others said was highly unconstitutional and draconian, was put on hold after Phaahla then extended the period for comment.

A set of interim regulations, including a mask mandate, was then put in place overnight. It is these regulations, among others, that are the subject of the court battle involving Phaahla. On 23 June he again, in a late-night notice published in the *Government Gazette*, repealed these regulations, but the litigation is continuing.

## Should Covid still be notifiable?

One of the main points of contention is Phaahla’s argument that Covid-19 must be listed as a notifiable medical condition, which makes it compulsory to report to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) if someone tests positive for the virus.

Le Roux said in an affidavit before court that they believe Phaahla is insisting on having Covid-19 declared a notifiable medical condition to give himself the option of being able to trigger restrictive regulations that will provide him with similar powers to those Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma had under the State of Disaster that was declared in March 2020 and only lifted in April 2022.

In his affidavit before the Pretoria High Court, Phaahla said a mask mandate must remain available as a tool to fight a new outbreak of infections.

His main argument is that the court should not hear the case, as he has withdrawn the matter, but he also dealt with allegations by the organisations that the regulations, which extended the mask mandate and further imposed some restrictions on gatherings and entry and exit into the country, were “irrational, unjustifiable or not supported by science”.

“The regulation requires the wearing of masks in indoor public places and public transport. The science is clear that there is a significantly higher risk of infection in enclosed congregate settings and that masks, even cloth masks, limit transmission. The fact that masks are less effective against a variant such as Omicron does not mean that it has no effect at all or that it will be effective against a future variant,” he said.

“While masking in enclosed congregate settings may not become necessary during the troughs between waves and if Covid-19

With the highly transmissible new Centaurus subvariant of Covid-19 on the horizon, it's probably a good idea to hang on to your masks for now. Photo: Nathan Howard/Getty Images

On 14 July at a press conference, the director of the World Health Organization, Tedros Ghebreyesus, said subvariants of Omicron, such as BA.4 and BA.5, continue to drive waves of cases, hospitalisation and death around the world.

He added that surveillance has reduced significantly – including testing and sequencing – making it increasingly difficult to assess the impact of variants on transmis-

sion, disease characteristics and the effectiveness of countermeasures.

But despite South Africa finding itself in a calmer moment, epidemiologists call this the “trough between waves”. Minister of Health Dr Joe Phaahla has filed an affidavit in the Pretoria High Court, saying that the option to introduce a new mask mandate must remain an available public health measure in case of another outbreak.

The court is expected to hear an application by several organisations, including AfriForum and Sakeliga, to have interim regulations, which included the mask mandate – which has since been repealed – declared unconstitutional.

Phaahla repealed the rules on 22 June but Piet le Roux from Sakeliga said their case highlights a number of concerns they have.

After President Cyril Ramaphosa lifted the State of Disaster, first introduced in March 2020, in April 2022 a set of interim

Health Minister Dr Joe Phaahla. Photo: Luba Lesolle/Gallo Images

