

BE CAUTIOUS

# New Covid wave, but no need to panic

*Numbers spiking across SA and other countries*

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SOUTH Africa could be in for a grim festive season as Covid-19 numbers spike across the country, dampening hopes of an economic recovery especially in the tourism sector.

The Health Department says "technically" we could already be in a sixth wave as the number of infections started increasing from September.

The department warned people to remain cautious as they prepared to flock to beaches and entertainment venues over the festive period.

The latest Covid-19 statistics, released this week, showed there were 5 984 active cases countrywide: 1 874 in the Western Cape; 1 324 in the Free State; 976 in KwaZulu-Natal, and 922 in Gauteng.

Department of Health spokesperson Foster Mohale said the symptoms were the same as before, but milder and more easily confused with flu, and in children, with other respiratory illnesses.

The reported spike comes after Unicef recently said it had found more than 100 000 children had been orphaned by Covid in the past two years. This means children who have lost one or both parents, or a secondary caregiver (grandparent or foster parent).

Unicef deputy representative for South Africa Muriel Mafico said the loss of a parent or caregiver had lifelong effects on children and stability was key.

"Children's lives have been devastated by the pandemic in so many ways and for those who have lost parents or caregivers, deep scars will last forever."

At the end of June, the government gave the green light for masks to come off. Now experts are again calling on people to exercise caution.

Mohale called on people not to panic, but to remember the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions did not mean the pandemic was over.

Epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim said there was an increase in Covid-19 cases in a number of countries, not just in South Africa.

"One of the countries battling with Covid-19 spikes is Singapore, which is experiencing severe cases. These cases are driven by new variants, and there are many of them," said Abdool Karim.

He said the spikes were driven by sub lineages of the Omicron variant but it had not translated into hospitalisations.

Abdool Karim warned people to stay away from poorly ventilated places and to wear a mask in crowded places, warning that the virus "is still among us".

In a WhatsApp message circulating in Durban, Dr Shivani Singh, from the Ramakrishna Clinic of South Africa, urged people to again "maintain precautions of wearing masks, hand hygiene, distancing and self-isolation if unwell and to get vaccination boosters, especially if not done in the last six months.

"Please be aware that we are seeing an increase in Covid infections this week with hospital admissions and symptomatic patients, particularly flu-like symptoms, sinusitis and chest involvement," wrote Singh.

Doctor Faisal Suliman, who has a practice in KwaMashu, said while he was aware the number of infections was rising because of chat groups he was on, he had not yet encountered any patients who had a need for "clinical suspicion", or a patient who had not improved and had to be sent for a Covid test.

The *Independent on Saturday* spoke to a 13-year old Covid patient, Divya, with the consent of her mother. Divya said last Monday she had a "scratchy" throat and blocked nose which was unusual because she never got sick.

She sucked throat lozenges and went to school, wearing a mask. Two days later she started coughing and was so fatigued she had to leave school.

A visit to her doctor revealed her heart rate was elevated. A rapid Covid test came back positive. Despite recovering, she said she still felt fatigued and struggled to concentrate in school.

The SOS Children's Villages head of marketing and communications, Lebo Phaweni, said they were heartbroken by the number of orphaned children and had placed nearly 3 000 in homes.

"More orphans mean there is a greater need for child protection services and organisations like ours."

Justin Foxtton, from the organisations The Baby Home and Peace Agency, said on average they looked after six babies at a time but was unable to comment on how many were orphaned as a result of the pandemic.

"The orphan issue is a complex issue, you can have a partial orphan, where one parent dies or where both parents died, or someone who was raised by a single parent. The statistics are shocking but do not give us much detail," Foxtton said.

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