

'No need to panic over Kraken strain'

First case of new Covid variant confirmed in SA, experts urge for calm

YOGASHEN PILLAY and REUTERS

THE Department of Health has confirmed that the first case of the XBB.1.5 Covid-19 variant, which some have dubbed "Kraken", has been detected in South Africa, and that they are meeting the scientific community to gather more information about it.

The variant was first detected in America last October and is a descendant of Omicron, the most contagious variant of the virus.

The XBB.1.5 variant case in South Africa was detected by gene sequencing carried out by researchers at Stellenbosch University, and internationally was given the nickname "Kraken" (a sea monster in Scandinavian folklore) as it is said to be more transmissible than other variants.

However, medical experts said there was no reason to panic over the variant.

Professor Tulio de Oliveira, the director of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation at Stellenbosch University, said the XBB.1.5 variant case had been detected through genome sequencing and the report on it was submitted to the Department of Health on Friday.

"How it works is we sequence the genome of the Covid-19 swab test, and from there we are able to identify mutations and the exact variant that is circulating. This takes place across South Africa at nine key labs.

"We discovered that it is still the Omicron variant in circulation, but now a sublineage of Omicron identified as XBB.1.5 has been detected."

De Oliveira added that XBB.1.5 is responsible for causing a surge in Covid-19 infections on the east coast of America.

"We have only detected one genome of the XBB.1.5 variant from 100 samples, which means it is at a very low prevalence. At the moment, we don't have any concern that this will fuel another wave of infections.

"If there is an increase in the prevalence of this variant that leads to more hospitalisation, we will inform the Department of Health, but at the moment we feel this is highly unlikely and there is no reason to be concerned."

De Oliveira said Covid-19 vaccines currently in circulation would still be effective against the new variant.

"It was last year in May that we had our last Covid-19 wave in South Africa. However, due to population immunity, which means immunity through previous infection and vaccination, our wave was not deadly and we didn't see a big

increase in hospitalisations.

"We are not expecting another wave of infections or any restrictions to be needed, but if you are concerned, it is advisable to get a booster vaccine to ensure that if you are infected you don't get severe disease."

Professor Nigel Garrett, the head of HIV pathogenesis and vaccine research at the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA and an associate professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, said it was too early to determine if the XBB.1.5 variant would cause severe disease.

"One of the concerns that we have noted is that there has been a big drop over the last six months in the number of people testing for Covid-19 and the number of people taking Covid-19 vaccines.

"However, due to the number of people who have been vaccinated in South Africa and (the extent of) previous infections, it is unlikely that the new variant would cause severe disease."

Garrett said he would advise anyone who felt at risk of severe disease to ensure they take a Covid-19 booster every six months, or at least once a year.

"It is the age group of (people) over 60 or people with pre-existing conditions that I would advise to take Covid-19 boosters. We must remember that the Covid-19 pandemic is not over, and we don't know in which direction the pandemic is headed."

Foster Mohale, spokesperson for the Department of Health, said the department would be meeting scientists to gather more information on the XBB.1.5 variant after detecting the first case of the variant.

"We will look to establish with our scientific community how transmissible the virus is, and if the variant can cause severe disease. We will also establish if there was any travel history in the confirmed XBB.1.5 variant. We will issue an official statement in due course."

The World Health Organization's senior epidemiologist Maria van Kerkhove said last week that XBB.1.5 is the most transmissible Omicron sub-variant that has been detected so far.

It spreads rapidly because of the mutations it contains, allowing it to adhere to cells and replicate easily.

The WHO said it did not have any data on severity yet, or a clinical picture of its impact.

It said that it saw no indication that its severity had changed but that increased transmissibility is always a concern.