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NO NEED FOR PANIC

SA 'in good space' with Covid strain

HEALTH experts have called for calm amid the discovery of a new Covid-19 sub-variant in the country.

This week, the National Health Department confirmed the first case of the new Covid-19 sub-variant EG.5 or Eris.

Officials said it was found in a sample taken from a patient in Gauteng.

While panic has set in in the UK, and with hospitalisation rates starting to increase, sparking concern that the UK is on the brink of being hit by another wave, South African health experts say there is no need for panic.

Shabir Madhi, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences and Professor of Vaccinology at the University of the Witwatersrand, said South Africans needed to remain calm.

"The one issue in South Africa is that the amount of testing that has been done is limited, especially for mild cases, but even when looking at hospitalisations, there hasn't been much of a change of individuals admitted for Covid-19 for the past 12 months, which is a really positive thing," said Madhi.

"But this particular sub-lineage of the Omicron variant, which has resulted in multiple sub lineages, in fact more than two hundred sub-lineages have evolved since it was first identified in South Africa, does indicate that it will be more transmissible than other variants and might be referred to as what we call antibody evasive."

"It is extremely unlikely that it will cause any surge of severe disease cases in South Africa and elsewhere simply because of the large number of people who have developed an immunity either from infections or from vaccinations."

According to the World Health Organization, EG.5 is a descendent lineage of XBB.1.9.2, which has the same spike amino acid profile as XBB.1.5.

The sub-variant was first reported in February 2023 and designated as a variant under monitoring in July.

Madhi added that only those with underlying medical conditions and above the age of 60 could be at risk with the new sub variant.

"In South Africa, we are in a really good position, except if you have some sort of underlying medical condition and you are above the age of 60 to 65. If you haven't received a booster vaccine in the past 12 months, that will be highly recommended."

"There is a new vaccine that is coming out that will also prevent infection, at least for a certain period of time. However, that vaccine is unlikely to be available in South Africa for the foreseeable future."

Madhi said it was important to keep track of the number of hospitalisations in the upcoming months rather than focusing on what variants were circulating in the country.

"In South Africa, we haven't been doing too much of testing, so there are very few samples that have been sequenced to determine which exact variants are circulating in the country, but to some extent, that is no longer important."

"I think it's important to keep an eye out for the number of people that are being hospitalised for Covid-19, and certainly, if we do see a significant upswing in numbers, then we need to become more attentive to investigate which variants are circulating."

"Right now, we are in a good space, and certainly in the past 12 months, the number of people who have developed whooping cough as well as influenza has been substantially higher

than the people who have developed Covid-19."

Madhi added that the flu had been a bigger threat to South Africans than Covid-19 in the past 12 months.

"Covid-19 has really settled in and is sort of part of the different viruses that circulate. More people have died of flu than of Covid-19 this year, and this is based on surveillance we have done at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and also looking at NICD surveillance."

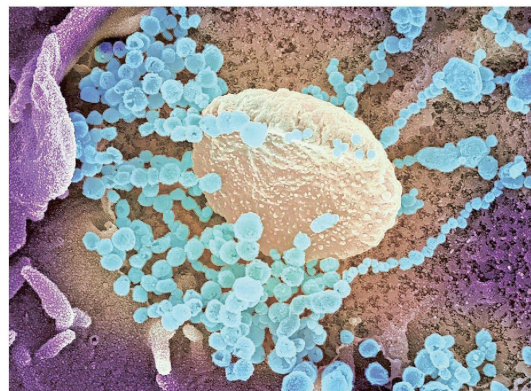
"The flu outbreak was substantially higher this year than Covid-19 cases. There was also a significantly higher number of children being hospitalised for influenza than for Covid, and the same applied for adults."

Leading epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim said while there was no need to panic, it was inevitable that the new strain would spread in South Africa.

"We live in an interconnected world, so it should come as no surprise when the new variant spreads in South Africa," said Abdool Karim.

"The new strain is more infectious than previous variants, and it is expected to spread fast, not just in South Africa, but across the world."

Despite this, Abdool Karim, who is also the director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa, explained that the more infectious EG.5 Covid-19 strain would



A HANDOUT picture from the US National Institutes of Health shows an electron microscope image of Sars-CoV-2 (round blue objects) emerging from cells cultured in a laboratory.

not require emergency measures as he urged against widespread panic.

"We don't expect the hospitals to be full, like we witnessed when the pandemic first started, because the Covid-19 vaccines work, and it is the best protection against the new strain."

He said that at least three doses of the vaccine were encouraged, with the fourth being a booster, particularly for those who were elderly or had compromised immune systems.

He also urged those who were infected by the new strain to wear a mask when in public, to avoid going to work or school for about three to five days and for people in general to try to do as much as they could outdoors.

The world-renowned epidemiologist explained that EG.5 emerged as a result of the Sars-CoV-2 virus mutating within the Omicron family.

"Broadly speaking, Omicron continued with small mutations that weren't that important because it didn't change the virus too much, and it didn't matter if it was changing because our immunity was very effective in controlling the viruses, but this situation has now changed," he said.

"EG.5 is now substantially different to Omicron because parts of our immunity do not fully recognise this

strain."

He said the human body's immune system was made up of B-Cells and T-Cells.

"B-Cells make antibodies and T-Cells kill the virus, but what is happening with EG.5 is significantly different to previous strains like Omicron."

"The first difference is that the B-Cells don't fully recognise the new strain, and our antibodies are then not as effective against the new variant, but the T-Cells recognise it and kill the virus."

He said that T-Cells could not prevent infections and only came into effect after someone had been infected.

"The good news is that the T-Cells are able to deal with the new variant, but the not so good news is that EG.5 is able to escape some of the antibodies and, as a result, is able to cause a large number of infections."

Despite news of the new Covid-19 variant, Abdool Karim said scientists had been expecting a new strain.

"We didn't know when it was going to happen and what it would look like, but we are pleased that our immunity is holding us in good stead."

"The virus is not done with us, and we are still living in the midst of a pandemic."