

# Children not more prone to current virus strains: Experts

Places where clusters began, more aggressive testing could explain why more cases surfacing

Clara Chong

There is little to suggest that the coronavirus strains currently circulating are more likely to infect children, experts said, even as more than 40 students and pupils from about 30 schools have come down with Covid-19 in the past month.

The reason so many children have been infected, said infectious diseases expert Paul Tambyah, is the environment where most of the cases involving them originated – a tuition centre.

It has become the epicentre of a large cluster, said Professor Tambyah, deputy director of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's Infectious Diseases Translational Research Programme.

The Learning Point tuition centre cluster had 28 cases as at Friday. On that same day, Singapore

reported its first incident of school-based transmission.

However, current evidence does not point to children being more likely to be infected with the B1617 variant that was first detected in India, compared with the original strain.

Official data from the Press Trust of India news agency suggests that the proportion of children infected during the first and second waves of the pandemic in India is similar, Prof Tambyah said.

Associate Professor Sylvie Alonso, co-director of the Infectious Diseases Translational Research Programme, said more aggressive testing among the younger age group could also be a reason for more cases surfacing.

"We seem to also see that the B1617 variant is overall more transmissible than the previous variants – across all age groups – thus affecting more children as well," she added.

## LOWER RISK

**Babies under one and children with underlying medical conditions such as diabetes and chronic lung disease may be more likely to get severe Covid-19, but generally, those under the age of 18 are far less likely to get severe Covid-19 compared with adults.**



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Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, vice-dean of global health at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the risk of

severe disease for those under the age of 18 is much lower than for adults.

"Babies under one and children with underlying medical conditions such as diabetes and chronic lung disease may be more likely to get severe Covid-19, but generally, those under the age of 18 are far less likely to get severe Covid-19 compared with adults," he said.

There is, however, a very rare and serious condition, known as multisystem inflammatory syndrome – a condition where different parts of the body can become inflamed.

It is seen only in children and is associated with Covid-19 infection, but Singapore has yet to see a case, Prof Hsu said.

Children under the age of 12 are also less likely to get infected, he added.

Still, children remain a weak link in Singapore's fight against Covid-19.

Young children tend not to be able to wear masks or observe safe distancing measures well, Prof Hsu said.

"So, even though they are individ-

ually less at risk of serious illness or spreading the virus, collectively, the risk will add up – particularly at tuition centres and other enrichment classes and play locations, where children from multiple schools typically congregate," he added.

Prof Alonso said children who are infected can also be carriers and transmitters of the virus without realising it, because they will be mostly asymptomatic.

She added that this would be a concern if they transmit the virus to vulnerable people in their households who could develop a severe form of the disease.

Prof Tambyah said: "Thus, the idea of vaccinating this age group is that it is a way to protect the vulnerable."

The Health Sciences Authority last Tuesday extended its authorisation for those aged 12 to 15 to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The Health and Education ministries will announce at a later date when Covid-19 vaccination will be extended to this age group.

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ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



## How kids in other nations are faring

More children have been infected in the second and subsequent waves of the coronavirus in some countries.

However, most countries do not keep national data about children infected with Covid-19. Instead, these figures are usually kept by individual states and provinces.

### UNITED STATES

Collating state data, the American Academy of Paediatrics said that as at May 13, more than 3.9 million child Covid-19 cases were reported. This is 14 per cent of all cases.

Between 0.1 per cent and 1.9 per cent of all child cases resulted in hospitalisation.

Children accounted for less than 0.21 per cent of all Covid-19 deaths. About 140 children under four have died.

The United States last week vaccinated 600,000 teens between 12 and 15 years old with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

### BRITAIN

Since January, about 12 to 15 children aged eight to 14 have been hospitalised every week for post-Covid-19 complications called paediatric inflammatory multi-system syndrome (Pims), official statistics say.

These complications show up as cough, rashes, fever, low blood pressure and abdominal pain.

Studies show that 47 per cent of those with Pims – a rare but extreme immune response – were of Afro-Caribbean origin and 28 per cent were of Asian origin.

### BRAZIL

The Health Ministry said 832 children under five years old have died of Covid-19. Other reports suggest that 2,060 children under nine have died, including 1,302 babies.

### SOUTH KOREA

Of the total number of Covid-19 cases as at March 24, 4.19 per cent were children below 10 years old, and 6.76 per cent were aged between 10 and 19.

But deaths among children are extremely rare, the government has said.

### ITALY

The coronavirus variant first found in Britain is prevalent among Italy's infected children, some experts have warned. They said schools must be reopened with caution.

### ISRAEL

More than 50,000 children and teens tested positive in January, more than during the first and second waves of Covid-19 infection, largely because of the more contagious variant first detected in Britain.

The vaccination drive is now expanded to 12- to 15-year-olds.

Rohini Mohan