

READY TO REACT

I expect that we will see recurrent waves of Covid-19 happening in future, but that means that as a country, we don't remain in a limbo state, whether holding on to restrictions or holding off restrictions completely. Instead, we remain in a dynamic state, if there is going to be an outbreak happening again, we look at what are the measures that need to be put in place.



PROFESSOR TEO YIK YING, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

MORE EASING UP

I can't accept wearing a mask when I take my dog for a walk, I can't accept that is protecting hospitals. So, I think outdoor masks would be an easy one to go. I think the social needs of people are not really going to be satisfied with five people at your home at one time, and I am not sure having 10 is really going to destroy hospitals. Ten vaccinated people that are all together, is that really going to? ... This is why I am not saying throw everything away, but I am saying travel easing will create livelihoods, and that is everyone.



PROFESSOR DALE FISHER, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital.

CONTINGENCY PLAN

But whatever the case, I think it is very important for us to continue to be able to monitor the situation and have something still in your pocket that should it turn out not the way that you predict... you can still hold on to the situation.



PROFESSOR LEO YEE SIN, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.



(From far left) Moderator Salma Khalik, who is The Straits Times' senior health correspondent, with Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health; Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases; and Professor Dale Fisher, senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital.

ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

the situation worsens.

Prof Fisher said the assumption is that the measures contribute to controlling case numbers in a major way. But he argued that they can, in fact, be rolled back gradually without impacting hospitals.

He added that people are unlikely to be satisfied with being allowed to have just five visitors to a household at any one time, and questioned if having 10 vaccinated people together in one place would really "destroy hospitals".

"The psyche of people, I think, will benefit a lot from not having to wear a mask when you are outside, and being allowed to have 10 people at your home for a birthday or for Christmas or Chinese New Year."

At the session moderated by ST senior health correspondent Salma Khalik, Prof Fisher said that healthcare workers also want their lives outside of work to return to normal.

"The people that are vulnerable - there is no doubt they exist. They will get Covid-19 just as people get flu and get serious illness," he said.

"We knew from the trials that vaccines were not 100 per cent effective, so we always expected this. Part of the future needs to be - how do we protect those individuals without impacting the whole of society?"

Professor Teo, who is dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said that the decision to relax Singapore's Covid-19 measures hinges on whether the healthcare system is ready for it, as infections will certainly go back up once the authorities do so.

But he predicted that most of the prevailing measures in place to curb Covid-19 will be eased this year.

Prof Fisher said Singapore should still be prepared for measures to be stepped up if cases surge and hospitals begin filling up again in future due to new variants of concern or waning immunity.

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SCAN TO WATCH
Covid-19 restrictions: When can they be eased further?
<https://str.sg/panel16>



Ease curbs further, but keep an eye on health system: Experts

Panellists say S'pore must be prepared for return of safety measures if cases surge again

Rei Kurohi

The daily Covid-19 case count peaked about three weeks ago and has been declining since, but pub-

lic hospitals are still seeing a heavy patient load, said experts.

This is because there is always a lag of about two weeks for the situation in hospitals to catch up with the peak in case number reporting. Healthcare workers are also deal-

ing with a growing number of non-Covid-19 cases that have been building up, given the focus on coronavirus patients in the last two years.

National Centre for Infectious Diseases executive director Leo Yee Sin said the current pressure on the healthcare system comes from other illnesses as well.

"We have to look at the totality of the critical services currently within the healthcare system. How can

we cater to all the needy patients regardless of Covid-19?" she said.

Professor Leo was one of three panellists speaking at the Covid-19 Restrictions: When Can They Be Eased Further? discussion hosted by The Straits Times and held at SPH Studios in Toa Payoh.

She noted that many of Singapore's earlier healthcare protocols were based on the disease patterns observed in the Delta variant.

When the less severe Omicron variant emerged, these protocols led to a significant number of patients being admitted to hospitals when they might have been better off recovering at home.

But Prof Leo added that most hospitals have reorganised themselves to better care for patients infected with the newer variant.

For instance, many hospitals now care for patients in cohorted

facilities, which means housing several Covid-19-positive patients together, instead of isolating them individually.

Most hospitalised patients with Covid-19 now tend to be older and have other conditions such as stroke or heart disease, she said.

She added that there will be a need to balance the needs of the healthcare system with those of other sectors as Covid-19 cases fall.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital, and infectious diseases expert Teo Yik Ying agreed it was important to keep an eye on the healthcare system.

Still, there can be an easing of safe management measures without serious impact on the system, they added.

What is important, though, is that Singapore needs to be prepared for a return of restrictions if

Prepare society to deal with uncertainty over pandemic: Panellists

Choo Yun Ting

The Covid-19 situation remains uncertain and recurrent waves of infection could happen in the future, but this should not mean that Singapore should hold back completely from easing its pandemic curbs, experts on a panel said yesterday.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of

Public Health, and his fellow panelists acknowledged the possibility that the relaxing of measures may need to be reversed at some point should a new variant or a new wave of infections emerge.

"But we shouldn't be in a limbo state to say that we will not ease any of our measures because there is this uncertainty that is still out there," Prof Teo said.

He was speaking at a discussion titled Covid-19 Restrictions: When Can They Be Eased Further?,

which was held at SPH Studios in Toa Payoh and moderated by Straits Times senior health correspondent Salma Khalik.

Communicating clearly to the public over what measures can be relaxed, what cannot be, and what are those that may have to be brought back in the case of a resurgence in cases "is just as important in deciding whether to ease or not to ease", Prof Teo said.

Another panellist, Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious dis-

eases consultant at the National University Hospital, brought up the question of what the endgame could be for Singapore in dealing with the pandemic and how the country is going to get there.

"I think the endgame is relative normality because it will be a circulating virus, we are getting exposed, we protect the vulnerable. I think that is just how it has to be," he said.

There will be some behavioural changes, Prof Fisher noted, adding: "I think the behavioural changes

will be in symptoms, I don't think it will be cool to go to work coughing and spluttering and sneezing any more, I think that there just won't be tolerance for that."

Other topics discussed at the panel included the strain on the healthcare system and how testing requirements for travel could change. Streamlined Covid-19 measures came into effect yesterday, including adjusting the maximum number of visitors to households to five at any one time, from five

unique visitors a day.

The multi-ministry task force tackling Covid-19 has said Singapore will be able to take the next step in easing its measures when the pandemic situation here improves and healthcare capacity permits.

Asked whether the country should start rolling back restrictions now, Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, sounded a cautious note.

She said: "While we are thinking

of rolling back or peeling off some of the measures, also be prepared that we are still at a very dynamic state.” Singapore may need to step up on curbs at some point, “depending on what is going to come in the future”.

Prof Leo stressed that whether or not Singapore should relax its Covid-19 restrictions is a balancing act – considering the needs of the healthcare sector as well as others.

“Whatever the case, I think it is very important for us to continue to be able to monitor the situation and have something still in your pocket that should it turn out not the way that you predict, you have a contingency plan, you can still hold on to the situation,” she said.

Prof Teo also highlighted at the panel that while Singapore as a society has been good at taking stock of deaths from the virus and the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, it has not been very good at counting “the cost of missed opportunities”.

When it comes to these other aspects, which include social interactions for children and mental wellness, the country is not great at assessing the cost impact, but it nevertheless exists, he said.

“For every day that we keep our measures, there is an impact not just to the economy, but also to the softer side of our lives.”

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The multi-ministry task force tackling Covid-19 has said that Singapore will be able to take the next step in easing its measures when the pandemic situation here improves and healthcare capacity permits.
ST PHOTO:
LIM YAOHUI

Higher number of cases results in more deaths from Covid-19

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

Omicron's mortality rate is lower than Delta's, but the high number of cases in recent months has contributed to more deaths in Singapore, especially among the unvaccinated, experts said.

There were 95 deaths from Covid-19 between January 2020 and September last year.

But the country has recorded another 1,058 Covid-19 deaths since Oct 1 last year.

Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), said the denominator, or the number of people who were infected, is an important consideration.

With vaccination and a milder Omicron variant, the mortality rate is five to six times lower than when the more virulent Delta vari-

>60

Age of more than half the Covid-19 patients at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

ant was dominant, she added.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital, said the surge since September came after curbs were eased in August. Together with Omicron being more easily transmitted, many more people, including seniors who remained unvaccinated, were infected.

"The death rates were remarkably over-represented in the unvaccinated," Prof Fisher added. "Whether it is (people) on oxygen, in intensive care units or deaths, the unvaccinated, even though they are only 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the popula-

tion, (they still accounted for) more than 50 per cent of all the cases."

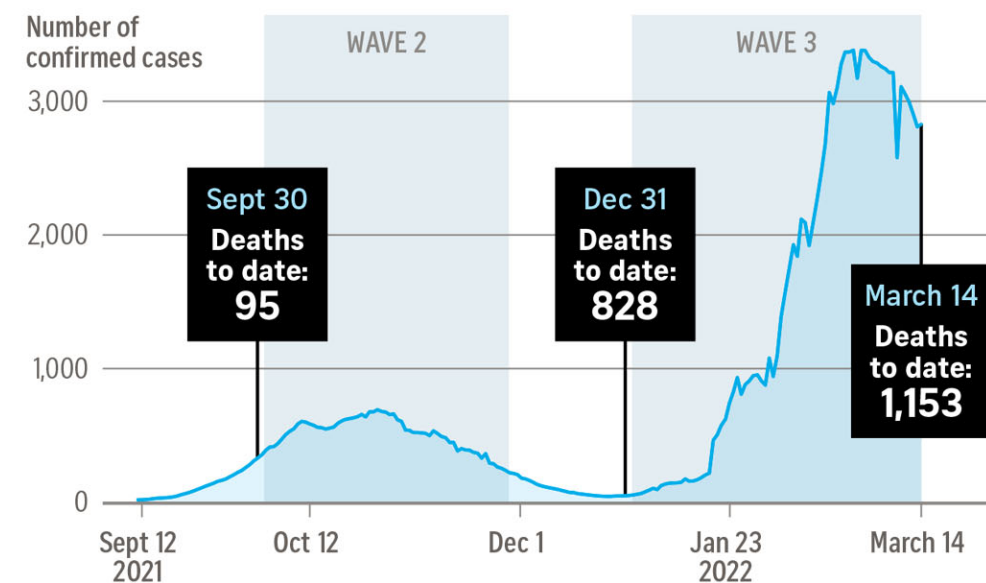
The two experts were among three panellists who spoke yesterday at a discussion titled Covid-19 Restrictions: When Can They Be Eased Further? It was held at SPH Studios in Toa Payoh and moderated by Straits Times senior health correspondent Salma Khalik.

The third panellist, Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, agreed that the current wave has been a problem for the unvaccinated.

"The fully vaccinated plus boosted people continue to remain at a 21-fold protection against anyone that is unvaccinated."

However, Prof Leo pointed out that vaccination notwithstanding, "the older you are, the higher the risk; the more chronic conditions you have, the higher the risk". "Vaccines will reduce the risk, but it can-

Covid-19: Infections and deaths



Source: MINISTRY OF HEALTH, OUR WORLD IN DATA STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

not completely take away that risk."

Prof Leo said more than half the Covid-19 patients at the NCID are over the age of 60. "So, we know that this particular segment of the population, despite having full vaccination, two doses, or being boosted with a third dose, they remain a vulnerable population."

Prof Fisher said a consideration, going forward, is how such individ-

uals can be protected without impacting the whole of society.

Prof Teo's solution is greater personal responsibility: "If I am going to visit my parents, my elderly grandmother, or if I am going to have meals or gatherings with an elderly person, I take that personal responsibility. I test myself before I go."

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STRONG PROTECTION FROM JABS

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PROFESSOR TEO YIK YING, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

VULNERABLE SEGMENT

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PROFESSOR LEO YEE SIN, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, on those over the age of 60.

Review travel curbs, testing as global situation eases

Experts say Omicron wave has peaked and it is time to halt tests of vaccinated visitors

Clara Chong

Experts are calling for the authorities to relax travel restrictions to Singapore, saying that the Omicron variant has peaked and imported cases are contributing little to the Covid-19 case count.

Speaking at the Covid-19 Restrictions: When Can They Be Eased Further? discussion hosted by *The Straits Times*, the experts say it is time to do away with polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and possibly even antigen rapid tests (ARTs) for vaccinated travellers entering the country.

The discussion, held yesterday at SPH Studios, featured Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health; Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital; and Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases. It was moderated by ST senior health correspondent Salma Khalik.

Prof Fisher noted that imported cases are a tiny fraction of Singapore's daily Covid-19 case count. As at March 14, the country saw 101 imported cases and 8,941 local cases.

Describing current testing measures required for travel as an "expensive inconvenience which deters travellers", Prof Fisher said easing travel to Singapore will create livelihoods for everyone, from bus operators to cafe owners.

"When you weigh up the social and economic benefits of freeing up this travel, it has value," Prof Fisher said.



All travellers to Singapore from vaccinated travel lane and low-risk areas only need to take an unsupervised self-test. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Prof Teo said Singapore needs to maintain its strategic advantage as an air hub and should allow anyone who is vaccinated to enter the country, instead of relying on vaccinated travel lanes (VTLs).

"Despite all the vaccinated travel lanes, if we look at what is necessary to make use of all that travel opportunities, there is still a lot of testing that is required... and the uncertainty and threat of being positive and asymptomatic and having all your plans messed up is very real."

"So, we have to look at it in totality and not be distracted by some of these countries announcing their plans to open up. Are people really travelling as much to those countries?" Prof Teo added.

Thailand opened its borders for quarantine-free travel for vaccinated individuals from Feb 1. Malaysia will be doing that from April 1. The Philippines opened its borders to vaccinated travellers from Feb 10, and Australia, from Feb 21.

However, travellers to those

countries are still required to undergo testing.

Prof Teo said: "If I want to plan a four-day trip to Bali, I actually need to go through three PCR tests and an additional unsupervised ART test."

As for Singapore, rules were eased from yesterday for all travellers from VTL and low-risk areas. They will only need to take an unsupervised ART within 24 hours of their arrival.

Prof Leo said that even as travel measures are eased, the global and local situations need to be monitored.

"With the current high number of local cases and a milder nature of the Omicron variant, the need for a PCR test is less critical."

"However, we need to monitor the situation and respond accordingly depending on the relative number of local cases in comparison to global cases and the virulence of the future variant of concern," Prof Leo added.

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EXPERTS' TAKE ON...

Additional booster shots

The Singapore population currently has some degree of resistance against Covid-19, thanks to high levels of infections and the recent administration of booster vaccinations, but this will not remain the case indefinitely, infectious diseases expert Teo Yik Ying said yesterday.

Professor Teo, who is dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said people may need multiple boosters, perhaps taken annually, or the country may see another outbreak or recurrent waves of Covid-19 in the future.

National Centre for Infectious Diseases executive director Leo Yee Sin added that the authorities are looking closely at the local data before making a decision, noting that many countries now offer additional shots for those over the age of 80.

Flu and other diseases

Even though Covid-19 has killed more than 1,100 people in Singapore, some deaths from other causes might have been prevented due to the reduction in social interactions.

Professor Leo noted that Singapore was among a handful of countries and regions that saw a negative excess mortality rate in 2020 and last year, according to a study published in *The Lancet* medical journal.

This means that fewer people died overall during the pandemic compared with the years before.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital, said that while cases of diseases such as hand, foot and mouth and even sexually transmitted infections would have declined because of the lower level of social interaction, other negative factors such as childhood weight gain and mental health issues are on the rise.

Prof Teo said the impact of the measures themselves may prove to be just as significant as Covid-19.

Herd immunity

Prof Teo said that getting vaccinated or being exposed to the coronavirus provides immunological protection so that subsequent exposures will not be as severe.

He also noted that the currently dominant Omicron variant is less severe than the Delta variant, and questioned whether it might be the right time to allow people to be exposed to the virus naturally and build up their immunity.

In the years to come, Covid-19 may hit in "returning waves", but each wave may cause fewer and fewer severe illnesses as people's bodies get used to it, he added.

Prof Leo, however, cautioned against taking Omicron too lightly. She noted that Omicron is effective at evading the immune system, even if one has been previously infected by Delta or another strain.

The Deltacron variant

One recent development is the so-called Deltacron variant, which combines the characteristics of the Delta and Omicron variants, but little is currently known about it, said Prof Leo.

"Although the number is very small at this point in time, it may fizzle out or it may become a problem," she said.

"We just don't know."

Prof Leo added that it is possible that yet another variant could emerge, even as scientists are busy studying the Deltacron variant, which was first detected in Covid-19 samples collected from France in January.

According to GISAID, an online open-access repository for genomic data on viruses, 35 cases have been detected in France and eight in Denmark.

Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands each have one case, while genetic sequencing company Helix has identified two cases in the United States.

Rei Kurohi