

Coronavirus: Singapore

Don't try to catch virus just to get resulting immunity, say experts

Hospitalisation risk remains; duration of immunity from being infected is uncertain

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If you are thinking of dropping your guard and hoping to catch Covid-19 just to "get it over with" and "enjoy" the resultant immunity, you should think again, say experts.

After multiple waves of Covid-19 infections here, six in 10 residents are thought to have contracted the coronavirus at least once, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung told Parliament on Monday, adding that those who had a recent infection are less likely to get infected now.

But multiple experts told The Straits Times that this should not encourage people to try to catch the virus just for the sake of getting it out of the way.

"Even though the symptoms are mild, there is still a small number of people who need to be hospitalised," said Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research and domain leader for biostatistics and modelling at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

His colleague at the school, Associate Professor Natasha Howard, agreed.

Aside from the risk of needing to be hospitalised, she said it was still uncertain how long immunity conferred by infection would last.

Meanwhile, Associate Professor Ashley St John, from Duke-NUS Medical School's Emerging Infectious Diseases Programme, pointed out that complications, including long Covid, can occur even in those who have been vaccinated against the virus.

Long Covid refers to long-term effects from a Covid-19 infection, such as fatigue, chest pain, and a loss of smell and taste that occur usually within three months from the onset of Covid-19, and could last for at least two months.



ART kits should reach all households by mid-September

More than a third of households in Singapore have received a set of 10 antigen rapid test (ART) kits in their letterboxes, under the third nationwide distribution exercise which kicked off on July 18.

As at July 31, about 600,000 households have received their ART kits, said the Ministry of Health (MOH), in a reply to queries from The Straits Times. The remaining one million households should get their kits by mid-September, the ministry added.

People can check the delivery status of the ART kits by using the SingPost mobile app. After verifying that their address is correct, they will receive alerts when the kits have been deposited into their mailboxes.

MOH said in a Facebook post last month that it could take a few weeks for some households to get their kits due to the volume involved.

So far, the Government has given out close to 25 million ART kits to households via two earlier nationwide distributions – one from August to September last year and another from October to December 2020. Each household received a total of 16 kits in these two distributions.

Anjali Raguraman

Six in 10 residents are thought to have contracted the coronavirus at least once and those who have had a recent infection are less likely to get infected now. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

"Individuals should continue to minimise their exposure to the virus to lower the risk of developing these complications," she said, adding that every transmission puts others at risk.

These include those having a greater risk of severe illness, such as the elderly or those who are immunocompromised.

Prof Howard said that given most people here have been vaccinated or recently infected, the benefits of continuing to mandate indoor mask-wearing are "minimal".

Prof Cook emphasised that when people are ill with Covid-19 or have a cold, they should wear a mask while interacting with others, and this should be a habit even in the post-pandemic world.

He noted that mask-wearing had

reduced the risk of transmission among the small fraction of the population who were infectious but asymptomatic during the containment and mitigation phases of the pandemic.

But the question now is whether there is sufficient benefit to enforcing mandatory mask-wearing when people have no reason to suspect that they are infected.

"With over 90 per cent of the population vaccinated, and over half the population infected, there is little reason to contain the virus (and) there is no need to continue mandatory mask-wearing," he said.

Prof St John said that it is important to remember that indoor mask-wearing, whether mandatory or not, can slow the transmis-

sion of disease.

Mr Ong had also said during his speech that despite its infection rates, Singapore would never be able to hit herd immunity due to the speed at which the virus mutates, and that regular booster shots could become the norm here.

Prof Cook said that there are varying interpretations as to what "herd immunity" means and that the understanding at the beginning of the pandemic – when there were hopes that the virus would not sustain itself once about half the population had been infected – no longer applies.

But he said that when cases start falling after a wave peaks, "fleeting herd immunity", which will be lost over time, can be achieved.

Prof St John, defining herd immu-

nity as when "the immunity present in all of the individuals in the community works together to slow the spread of disease", said herd immunity is present, but vaccines currently are not perfect, resulting in breakthrough infections.

"We hope that with interventions like boosters or possible next-generation Covid-19 vaccines, we could improve herd immunity," she said.

Prof Howard said that herd immunity as a form of permanent protection once a person is infected or vaccinated will not happen with Covid-19, adding that there is a need for regular booster shots to combat the rapid mutation of the virus.

Prof Cook said that the cost of enforcing mandatory yearly booster shots, especially if they are part of

the requirements for travel and entry into malls, would be quite high.

Noting that infections result in protection as well, he called instead for frequent vaccination to be encouraged instead of obliged.

Prof St John said that future vaccines and their booster doses will be more effective in blocking transmission, especially of new variants of the virus.

She said: "There are precedents for eradicating viruses, like smallpox, based on developing strong vaccines... eventually there should be a tipping point where the virus cannot mutate to escape the pressure of the immunity we have collectively – but we are quite far from that goal at this time."

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