Ease curbs carefully to avoid large peak in infections: Expert

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Singapore will need to tread carefully as it eases its circuit breaker measures amid the Covid-19 outbreak, as there could still be a "large peak" in infections down the road, an expert has warned.

"It is unlikely we are past our peak," said Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, during an interview with The Straits Times.

"Maybe we are past the peak for the first wave of infections, but if in a period after circuit breaker we are not moving towards a situation where we’re controlling the epidemic – (that is, where) we are letting it become unmitigated, then I think we can expect to have a large peak going forward."

More than 25,000 people in Singapore have been infected with the coronavirus.

While the country’s total case count continues to rise – with hundreds of new infections reported daily – the numbers are starting to stabilise. The vast majority of new cases are foreign workers who live in dormitories.

China and Germany both saw a rebound in infections after easing lockdown restrictions.

"If we completely let our guard down and go back to life as it was... you will end up with something that becomes like an exponential growth in the number of infections."

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ALEX COOK. We shared research at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

Customers using the SafeEntry digital check-in system at Pet Lovers Centre at White Sands shopping mall yesterday. Associate Professor Alex Cook, an expert in infectious disease modelling, said that as restrictions are eased, it will be important to keep an eye on not just new but also unlinked cases.

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The queue for a haircut at Tiang Bahru Plaza yesterday. Singapore’s economy is set to reopen in phases after June 1, with the easing of the tighter measures of the circuit breaker period.

The Government has said it will keep a close eye on the number of new infections to decide how soon more restrictions can be lifted. If the situation flares up again, circuit breaker measures could be reintroduced.

Prof Cook, an expert in infectious disease modelling, had earlier predicted – correctly – that Covid-19 infections could reach 10,000 or 20,000 in Singapore by end-April.

As restrictions are eased, it will be important to keep an eye on not just new but also unlinked cases, Prof Cook said.

This is because such cases are "an indication that we may be missing infections", he added.

Asked yesterday what the worst-case scenario could be, he suggested that if the country did nothing to stop the spread of the coronavirus, it could see as many as tens of thousands of new infections a day.

Prof Cook said studies show that, during the swine flu – or H1N1 flu – outbreak in Singapore in 2009, about 17 per cent of the adult population was infected in the first wave.

"If we include children, the figure is probably closer to 20 per cent... that is, around one million people in Singapore," he said. "We don’t know exactly, but the shape of the epidemic curve suggests that at its peak, around 50,000 people might have been infected daily" here during the swine flu outbreak.

Prof Cook stressed that social distancing and staying at home need to continue. "When we move out of circuit breaker, it won’t be life as normal for some time yet," he added.

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