Experts urge vigilance as cases flare up globally

As more activities resume, Singapore could see second wave like in other places, they warn

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The spike in Covid-19 cases globally is concerning, said public health experts who warned that the same resurgence of cases could happen here, if people are not careful.

Australia, South Korea, Japan and Hong Kong are experiencing new waves of infections, despite having good health systems and robust strategies to combat the virus, they stressed.

Singapore’s advantage is its strict enforcement measures, but the next few weeks could see some numbers rise as a result of social and business activities.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, told The Straits Times: “As we continue to gradually relax social distancing measures, we will need to closely monitor the trend and make necessary adjustments as needed.”

His colleague, Associate Professor Alex Cook, chief of research at the school, said a concern was whether transmission rates would rise sharply as Singapore continues to gradually relax social distancing measures.

He said: “As we open up, we will see a rise in cases. It is important that we act quickly to prevent the spread of the virus.”

The number of new community cases had increased to an average of 16 per day in the past week, from an average of 10 cases per day in the week before.

The number of imported community cases also went up, from an average of five to eight cases a day in the same period.

On whether people should be concerned about reports of localised crowds during the recent general election, Prof Cook said: “It was a one-off event, so even if there were some additional risks from the testing process, the impact on the epidemic would be limited.”

Infections elsewhere: Soo Huey Hui, who expects a spike in cases in some seasons, said it would be “a miracle” if this doesn’t happen.

“The virus is like a predator searching for the weakest link,” Dr Leong cautioned, calling for Singaporeans to be more vigilant, avoid crowds and maintain safe distancing as much as possible.

With Covid-19 here to stay, a sustainable and effective testing strategy is paramount, the experts said.

Even as more tests are done, it is important to do so in a targeted way, to proactively pick up suspected infections, especially among those working on the front lines or those who have contact with a diverse and large number of people, Prof Teo said.

“Singapore can certainly increase the number of tests, so it is not a matter of capacity. But we can move towards both increasing testing capacity, and also the clever deployment of the available test kits to perform targeted surveillance, in addition to identifying the cases.”

Forward surrveillance may be explained, to assess situations and circumstances, so that cases can be picked up early and possible outbreaks minimised.

This includes, for example, testing of sewage.

An example of efficient testing is to pool multiple samples from suspected cases into a single polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test.

“The strategies in the use of PCR tests are constantly evolving, and we need to identify the strategies that are more efficient and sustainable,” Prof Teo said.

With the global situation remaining fluid, Singapore should also try to maintain its high standards when it comes to air travel, he added.

The country can cautiously open for business in regions with specific countries which have adequately controlled the outbreak with strict measures, but mass tourism to countries that will involve a lot more traffic would be harder to implement, Prof Teo explained.

Ultimately, Singaporeans will have to adapt to a new normal to keep the economy moving, with cases cropping up here and there, and sudden periodic surges, Dr Leong said.

“We cannot expect zero cases. Look at Hong Kong and Beijing – even with a good mask culture, and an early lockdown, they still had spikes in cases,” he said.

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