S’poreans should not let guard down against virus: Experts

As the authorities investigate whether safe distancing rules were breached leading to a family cluster of Covid-19 cases, experts warned that people should not let their guard down against the virus as Singapore continues to reopen.

The country is still not out of the woods at least until a viable vaccine reaches the market, they said.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, said if individuals or groups decide to have their own set of rules, they stand to put the whole community at risk.

He urged the country to stand united, as if case numbers rise, the Government may need to increase restrictions again.

With phase two, which started on June 19, extending beyond two months, it is also important that Singaporeans do not become too greedy in wanting a quicker pace of easing of restrictions, he noted.

“Nothing has changed, the virus is still there and we are still vulnerable. People should be pleased that our numbers are low and we have good freedoms.”

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said it was natural to have some fatigue about rules like wearing a mask and social distancing, but this was something the country must tackle collectively to avoid a resurgence in the community.

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Recent family cluster shows need to abide by safe practices: Experts

The whole community can be put at risk if individuals let their guard down, they warn

Clara Chong

A recent family cluster of five Covid-19 cases from two households is a sign that it is still critical for Singaporeans to continue safe practices, at least until there is a viable vaccine, experts cautioned yesterday. The Ministry of Health said on Sunday it is investigating if there were any breaches in safe distancing regulations related to the family cluster. Increasingly, Singaporeans have been letting their guard down, and gatherings — such as birthday celebrations of 20 people across four tables held in a restaurant — are not uncommon sights.

But the grim reality is that things can get worse quickly, said Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, told The Straits Times. "The public needs to have a long-term view, and individuals or groups decide to have their own set of rules, they stand to put the whole community at risk.

The recent practices of having more than five in a group, wearing masks and keeping a safe distance have served Singapore well and kept the country safe, but if people believe in these practices previously, they should continue to do so and not allow fatigue to set in, Prof Fisher said.

He said the country needs to "remain on high alert," and that the full impact of the cluster could not yet be seen. "If case numbers rise, the Government may need to take some restrictions and everyone will lose some freedoms," he said. Professor Yeo Wei Ling, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said: "Until we are confident that Singapore will no longer see chains of community infections, individuals, employers and businesses must continue to keep up the same precautionary measures.

He said that the recent cluster was particularly worrying, as at least one of the confirmed cases was still active in the community while symptomatic.

All it would take is one unfortun-ate incident to seed a larger cluster and ignite infection chains that lead rapidly to widespread community transmissions. "This would need a lot more effort and time to contain, he warned.

"But the country is experimenting with relaxing some border restrictions, there is an even greater need for each individual to keep his guard up and maintain discipline over mask wearing, safe distancing and limiting large gatherings, he stressed.

A lack of community cohesion could also see other countries making it harder for Singaporeans to travel, Prof Fisher noted.

There are signs that it may not be all smooth sailing ahead if people do not stay vigilant, he said, pointing to the sight of crowded malls. It is important to not build crowds as that will trigger the start of a second wave. "If many people and safe distancing is not possible. Of course, our numbers remain good, but what makes increasing numbers is the bad behavior such as crowding and the lack of safe distancing."

With Phase Two, which started on June 19, extending beyond two months, it is important that Singa poreans do not become too complacent in wanting a quicker pace of easing of restrictions, Prof Fisher said. "Nothing has changed, the virus will still be there and we are still vulnerable. People should be pleased that our numbers are low and we have good freedoms."

The relaxation of rules also de-pends on factors beyond the sheer number of people in a group, said Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health. Things like the size of a group, the proximity of people in it, the level of ventilation, and if there will be food eating, loud conversation or singing. All play a role in determining the level of risk, he noted.

It is hard to gauge every manoeuvre in general rule, he added. "So the tension is increasing the social group size to more than five is the need to second spaces and how people will behave once the limits are removed. People are complacent, much more so than previously," he noted.

Nonetheless, despite the persistence of community cases, Singapore remains in a good position, Prof Cook said.

The two most important things for people to remember are to reduce crowding and maintain social distancing.

With Covid-19 being a new normal that everyone needs to adapt to, being able to deal with some level of fatigue would be critical, he stressed.

"The reality is, until we are able to break our daily lives without having to wear a mask or worry about social distancing and safe eating, there will always be a degree of fatigue that one will feel, and it is something we will have to learn to live with."

One silver lining of the family cluster would be in as a test of the overall system, from tracing and testing to insisting contacts.

"If the system leaves us insufficiently, we should see perhaps a few more linked cases emerge during the quarantine period, and subsequently the cluster diminishes," said Prof Cook.

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