S’pore sees longest stretch without local infections

Although no local cases in 13 days, experts say threat of imported cases seeping into community exists

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For the past 13 days, there has been no Covid-19 cases from the dormitories and the community, marking the longest stretch without local cases in Singapore since the pandemic started.

Although infectious diseases experts say this indicates Singapore’s success in containing the virus amid soaring and resurging cases abroad, they stress that it is not time to get complacent as Covid-19 is not over.

Since Nov 1, there has been fewer locally transmitted cases, with two from the community and five from the dorms on Nov 3, 4, 5 and 10.

Although local cases seem to be tapering off, the experts cautioned that local cases may still be lurking.

“Getting zero cases does not mean we have reached zero infections,” said Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

The school’s dean, Professor Teo Yik Ying, added: “There could still be a very small number of undetected asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic cases that are circulating, and may seed further community cases.

“Unless there is widespread and routine testing like what we do for migrant workers in dormitories, it will be difficult to identify asymptomatic cases in the community.”

Also, with imported cases trickling in each day, the chances of imported infections seeping into the community still exists, said the experts.

Since Nov 1, the country has mostly seen imported cases in single digits daily, with the highest being 18 on Nov 11.

Prof Cook said: “Even with 14 days of strict quarantine and an exit test, a small percentage of infected travellers will pass undetected.

“That is why I don’t get too excited about reaching zero cases - there’s always a risk of spillover from importations.”

Some who get infected shortly before flying into Singapore will have a long incubation or latent period before the virus manifests itself, and that causes them to test negative on their exit swab at the end of their quarantine, he added.

Most imported cases will be detected, either manifesting symptoms while on quarantine or testing positive at exit, but a small fraction will not be,” Prof Cook said.

The experts also said imported cases may rise during the festive seasons between December and February, and as more students studying abroad return home during the winter break.

But the chances of them spreading Covid-19 to the community are slim as Singapore frequently updates its border control measures and stay-home notice policies based on changes in the coronavirus situations abroad.

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