

Coronavirus outbreak: SINGAPORE

Discharged patients no longer infectious: NCID experts

To be doubly sure, patients who recovered are checked again when they return for follow-up

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

The 66 Covid-19 patients who have been discharged in Singapore no longer have the virus in them and cannot pass the infection on to others, experts at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) said.

However, it is not known if patients can get infected more than once, as not enough is known yet about a person's immune response to the disease.

To be doubly sure, Dr Shawn Vasoo, clinical director of the NCID, said the centre has started taking swabs from patients who are well when they return for a follow-up check two weeks after discharge.

He said it would be rare for a patient to become infectious again, but noted "we will be evaluating this".

The Japanese authorities said a woman there tested positive for the disease for a second time three weeks after recovering and returning home. But not enough information is available on the case, and the Singapore authorities are reaching out to their Japanese counterparts to determine the exact circumstances.

Reports have also surfaced in China that one in seven patients who has recovered is still infectious.

The Straits Times spoke to experts about how Singapore makes sure patients who are discharged are not infectious, and about the possibility of getting Covid-19 more than once.

Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive di-



In Singapore, doctors monitor viral shedding in a patient's respiratory tract – in other words, they check if the patient is still releasing live virus and thus remains contagious. Virus shedding stops when the patient no longer has the virus in him. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

rector of NCID, said doctors here monitor viral shedding in a patient's respiratory tract – in other words, they check if the patient is still releasing live virus and thus remains contagious. This is done by taking nasal or throat swabs or sputum.

Virus shedding stops when the patient no longer has the virus in him.

"Patients are discharged only when they have clinically recovered and molecular testing indicates they have stopped shedding the virus," she said. This means that should they sneeze or cough, there is no release of virus that could contaminate surfaces or infect others.

Many of the patients would be feeling well, especially in the last

few days of their hospital stay, but keeping track of viral shedding is a precaution Singapore has taken.

Prof Leo said when tests show that patients are completely cured and no longer have the virus in them, they are still kept in the hospital for at least another day, waiting for the results of a second test done 24 hours after they have received the first all-clear results. Beyond that, she added: "Cases who are discharged are reviewed at our clinic."

Dr Li Yueping, director of the intensive care unit at China's Guangzhou No. 8 People's Hospital, had said that test results of 14 per cent of its patients who had been discharged returned to positive when

they went for follow-up checks. However, the hospital also said it was still unclear whether the virus detected in the recovered patients was still active.

Dr Vasoo said this is not surprising – nor is it worrying.

The virus was found in anal swabs.

He said data from the Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak in 2003 found the virus in patients' stool for about four weeks after they had recovered. But this does not mean the virus is still viable, he said, adding that the virus spreads through droplets. If it is not found in respiratory secretions, people should not be able to infect others.

Even if the virus in the stool is still

active, it "should not be a source of transmission with modern sanitation and hygiene being observed".

On whether discharged patients can be infected again by the coronavirus – as Osaka's prefectural government said had happened to one of its earlier patients, a female tour bus guide – Dr Vasoo said doctors currently do not know how long patients remain immune to the disease.

"We need to study the immune response of patients infected with Covid-19. At the moment it is unknown if patients infected by Covid-19 will have long-lasting immunity to the virus," he said.

salma@sph.com.sg

Number of cases here could rise, cautions MOH chief health scientist

Joyce Teo

The chief health scientist at the Ministry of Health (MOH), who led Singapore's public health response to the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) epidemic, has cautioned that the number of coronavirus cases here can rise any time.

While Singapore has managed to slow the spread of the disease, the

virus continues to spread rapidly around the world.

Professor Tan Chorh Chuan told The Straits Times: "Singapore's approach of actively looking for new cases and quarantining close contacts has been effective in ring-fencing clusters of infection so far, and we have not seen evidence of community spread. However, it is premature to say that the worst is over."

"Given the rate at which new

cases are being reported around the world, there is always a risk of new imported cases. We, therefore, have to remain vigilant."

The outbreak has evolved rapidly since it originated in Wuhan, China, in December. It has spread to over 40 countries and the total number of cases is now more than 82,000, with the bulk of them in China.

On Tuesday, the number of new cases reported outside China ex-

ceeded the number of new ones in China for the first time. In Singapore, a total of 66 of the 96 confirmed cases have fully recovered.

While the number of new cases in China has come down, World Health Organisation director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the sudden rise of cases in Italy, Iran and South Korea was "deeply concerning". Italy has more than 400 cases and 12 deaths, Iran has

139 cases and 19 deaths, and South Korea 1,595 cases and 13 deaths.

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, programme leader for infectious diseases at the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the virus "spreads between people in a similar fashion as influenza – primarily through droplets and contact – but because it is a novel virus, there is no immunity to it and, hence, it ap-

pears to be highly transmissible".

Some scientists predicted that more than half of the world's population could have the coronavirus.

Prof Hsu said this is based on epidemiological modelling projections and occurs only if nothing is done to stop the spread of the virus. He said the coronavirus is "more serious than initially thought and the worst is yet to come for most countries".

Still, given current active and massive interventions in many countries, it is unlikely that the world will get to the stage where half the population is infected, he added.

joyceteo@sph.com.sg

Hotels shut floors, ask staff to take leave amid downturn

Melissa Heng

Hotels are moving fast to tackle the downturn with one mothballing some floors to save on electricity and manpower and another telling staff to use two-thirds of their annual leave by the end of May due to the lack of guests.

Other cost-cutting measures are being deployed as well, including reducing restaurant opening hours and shortening times for services such as in-room dining.

With occupancy plummeting from almost 100 per cent to roughly 30 to 60 per cent in the past two months, cost-cutting has become essential.

About six of the 16 floors at Parkroyal Collection Marina Bay have been closed off in order to concentrate manpower efforts on fewer rooms and save electricity.

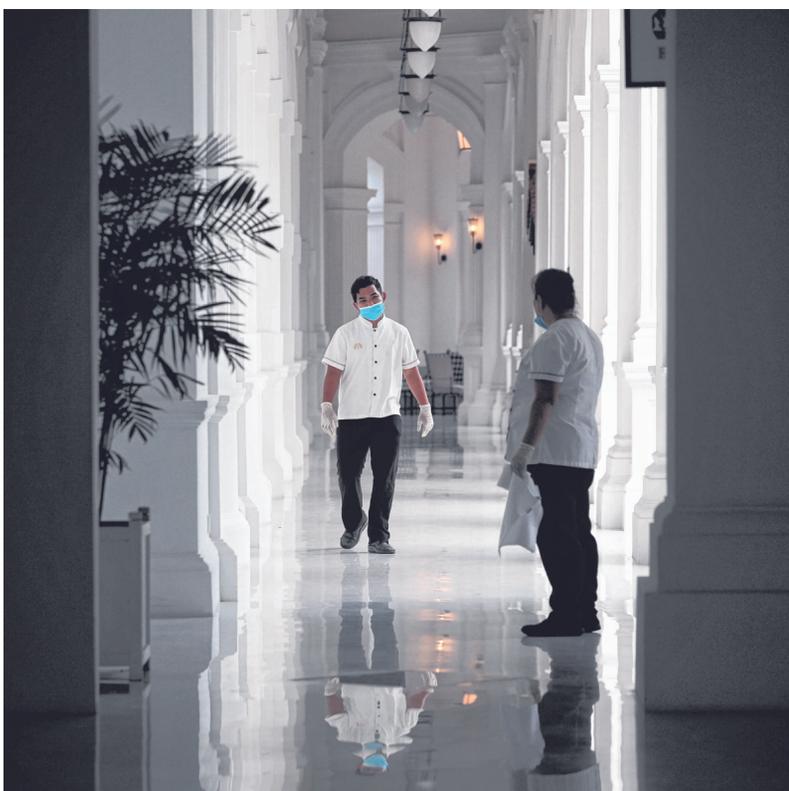
General manager Melvin Lim added that staff have also been encouraged to clear their annual leave or take voluntary no-pay leave.

Two of the hotel's restaurants – Peach Blossoms and Atrium Lounge – have also had their opening hours shortened.

Room service, usually offered round the clock, is now available from 7am to 10.30pm.

Staff at Royal Plaza on Scotts must take two-thirds of their annual leave by the end of May.

General manager Patrick Fiat



Hotels in Singapore have adopted cost-cutting measures as occupancy plummets amid the virus outbreak, including sending staff for training during the lull and shortening hours for services such as in-room dining. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

said: "We believe the recovery should start after May. Hopefully the rebound will be strong to make up for lost business in the past months."

The hotel has also cut down on outsourcing certain jobs. The housekeeping team, for example, is taking on additional tasks such as uniform cleaning that was previously outsourced to external suppliers.

Mr Fiat said the hotel also plans to send staff for training during the

lull, a move that is in line with recent measures announced by various government agencies.

Workforce Singapore's Job Redesign Place-and-Train programme gives hotels salary support of up to 70 per cent, capped at \$2,000 a month per employee for up to six months.

Singapore Hotel Association (SHA) executive director Margaret Heng said: "Members may tap salary funding support to trans-

form jobs and invest in training of their workers in the redesigned job roles during this period."

She noted that Parkroyal on Kitchener Road and Copthorne King's Hotel are taking part in the Workforce Singapore programme.

Ms Heng added: "SHA will endeavour to work with the industry to upskill and reskill workers in preparation for the upturn."

melheng@sph.com.sg

Muis asks tour agencies to inform would-be pilgrims of Saudi ban

Hariz Baharudin

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) has told tour agencies here to ensure would-be pilgrims affected by Saudi Arabia's suspension of entry of foreigners amid fears of a coronavirus pandemic are informed, and efforts are made to adjust their plans.

The council said this in an advisory yesterday after the kingdom said countries where the coronavirus has spread will be affected by the measure.

Earlier, in a notice sent to tour agencies seen by The Straits Times, the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Singapore said it has temporarily suspended foreigners from entering the country for umrah, or minor pilgrimage. It has also stopped issuing visas for umrah, it added.

Yesterday evening, Muis said it has advised the Association of Muslim Travel Agents of Singapore (Am-tas), which represents 50 agencies here, to ensure that all Singaporeans who are making arrangements to perform umrah are "adequately briefed on this development".

Based on data shared by Am-tas, Muis said over 2,000 people have signed up for the umrah next month. It said all would-be pilgrims who have made umrah arrangements during the period of suspension are advised to consult their travel agents.

ST contacted several local tour agencies focusing on Muslim pilgrimages, and they said they are not cancelling any trips yet.

Mr Tengku Mohamad Fouzy Jumat, chairman of Am-tas which represents 50 agencies here, said: "We have to wait and see... We are still waiting for details."

ST has reached out to the Saudi Arabian Embassy for comment.

The kingdom hosts the two holiest sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina, which are key stops for pilgrims on umrah as well as the haj.

The haj pilgrimage, one of the five pillars of Islam, is performed only once a year during the last month of the Islamic calendar. Bookings for the haj and umrah pilgrimages are typically made months in advance. Millions of Muslims from around the world travel to Saudi Arabia throughout the year, with a peak during the haj.

Tour agencies which coordinate umrah packages here, which can cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 for each person, said they will take directions from Am-tas.

An agency representative, who declined to be named, said it is unlikely any decision will be made until next week as Saudi Arabia's two-day weekend starts today.

"They will go back to work only on Sunday, so we will probably hear from them only then," she said. "In the meantime, we are advising our customers to do their best to stay patient and pray for the best."

Ms Tengku Madiah Jumat, a director of TM Fouzy Travel and Tours, said the company will do its best to avoid any cancellations. It will also try to provide alternative departure dates for its customers should Singapore be impacted by the suspension.

"One of the biggest problems at our end is the airlines because we have to pay them the (airline passenger) fee upfront, which is about \$1,600 per person," she said.

harizbah@sph.com.sg