

Coronavirus Singapore

S'pore in critical period of fight against virus: Lawrence Wong

New cases will continue to be picked up before tapering off in about two weeks, says minister

Justin Ong
Political Correspondent

Singapore is in a critical period of its fight against Covid-19, and new cases will continue to be picked up before tapering off in about two weeks, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said yesterday.

He added that the infections picked up now were likely seeded two weeks ago, and he was confident the latest round of measures would bring down the numbers.

"But we also need to recognise that there is a time lag with the measures that we introduce," he said, explaining that it would take time for results to show.

In the meantime, the Govern-

ment will continue to monitor the situation carefully in consultation with health experts to determine if further tightening of measures will be required, he said.

He called on Singaporeans to "do everything we can" to slow down the spread of the virus – by getting vaccinated, staying at home and being properly masked – noting that they have cooperated with the measures so far and taken the restrictions in their stride.

"I know this has been very difficult and disruptive for all of you," he added. "Let us hunker down; we keep our spirits up, continue to support each other, and we can get through this bump together."

He made the remarks as the multi-ministry task force on Covid-19, which he co-chairs, announced a new strategy for Singapore's vaccination programme in a bid to protect more people faster.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, his co-chair, said those who sign up for Covid-19 vaccination from today will get their second dose six

GET THROUGH IT TOGETHER

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FINANCE MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG, co-chair of the multi-ministry task force on Covid-19.

to eight weeks after the first, instead of three to four weeks later, so that there are more doses for people to get their first jab.

This comes amid a spike in Covid-19 cases, with clusters forming at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and

Changi Airport in the past few weeks, and more unlinked cases being detected.

As at Monday, there were 149 new community cases in the preceding week, of which 42 were unlinked.

To curb the spread of the virus, people are no longer allowed to dine-in at eateries, students will shift to home-based learning and group gatherings are now limited to two people, down from five.

Mr Wong said these stricter measures were necessary amid growing evidence that the Covid-19 variants behind the recent outbreaks can spread through aerosolised particles, rendering previous precautions insufficient.

On how the latest restrictions would affect the economy, he acknowledged that the recent development had made the outlook more uncertain. But he said he believed Singapore's economy was still on track to achieve positive growth at the end of the year.

Pointing to the Ministry of Trade and Industry's forecast for Singa-

pore's gross domestic product to grow between 4 per cent and 6 per cent, he said: "I think there will still be continued recovery in certain segments. But with the latest measures – and again, depending on how long this will last, how long some of the business entities will have to close – then there will certainly be an impact."

The recent measures have been the strictest since Singapore came out of its circuit breaker period last June. The circuit breaker measures took their toll, pushing Singapore into a technical recession for the first time since 2009.

Mr Wong said the Government will continue to monitor the economic situation closely to see if businesses and workers need extra help.

The task force was asked if Singapore might have been able to avert the current situation and open up faster if more people had been vaccinated – and quicker. Mr Ong said it was not wise to time the opening of the economy and the borders with the rate of vaccination. Rather, it should be pegged to outcomes like the number of infections, number of unlinked cases and severity of infections, for example.

He said this was correlated with measures taken such as vaccination and risk management, adding: "So by taking proper steps, including the major thrust of vaccination, we can deliver good outcomes, which will then allow us to open up more."

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Possibility of airborne virus transmission being investigated

Kok Yufeng

The authorities are investigating the possibility that Covid-19 can be spread through airborne transmission in some settings, the Ministry of Health's director of medical services Kenneth Mak said yesterday. Responding to a question about

recent reports of airborne transmission and whether this had occurred at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Associate Professor Mak said the authorities and TTSH are completing epidemiological investigations and hope to have further information to assess this possibility.

The authorities are also looking at how the virus could have spread in other clusters and settings.

"In each of the settings, we try to assess whether it could plausibly be a result of physical contact, as a result of droplet spread or... the possibility of aerosolised transmission."

Prof Mak said reports have emerged suggesting a stronger possibility of airborne transmission in certain settings, particularly closed environments with limited airflow and poor ventilation. But droplets and contaminated surfaces remain dominant ways by which the virus can transmit, he added.

As for the TTSH cluster, which saw 46 cases, Prof Mak said there may not be one single factor that contributed to the virus spreading among hospital staff and patients.

But it is plausible that some form of airborne transmission could have taken place, Prof Mak said.

This could have happened if there was an infected person with a high viral load emanating a large amount of the virus, possibly supplemented by an environment associated with airborne transmission.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said Singapore's experience with Covid-19 showed that the most common mode of transmission is still among unmasked people in crowded environments with a lot of vocalisation and interaction, and in enclosed spaces with poor ventilation.

"These are the conditions that usually lead to big spreading events, and I think these are the settings that we should be most careful about," Mr Ong said, adding that the latest set of Covid-19 measures are deliberately aimed at stopping such activities in such settings.

He also thanked TTSH staff and urged Singaporeans to continue cheering them on. Noting that no new cases have been detected at the hospital for 14 days, or one incubation cycle of the virus, he said it is a good sign TTSH has started admitting new patients. Many staff under quarantine are also progressively returning to work this week.

However, patients and hospital staff continue to be regularly swab-tested. TTSH staff will also remain working in segregated zones and split teams in the next two weeks. He added: "It has been very difficult at this time to lose one of our hospitals, but it is recovering progressively, steadily, and there is good light at the end of the tunnel."

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Vaccine passports not free pass to travel: Ong Ye Kung



Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said proof of vaccination does not mean being able to travel abroad easily.

Rei Kurohi

Having proof of vaccination, or so-called vaccine passports, will not give people a free pass to travel abroad easily, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said at a media conference yesterday.

Ultimately, countries will have to come to an agreement to recognise the vaccine certificates issued by other countries before travel will be allowed, he said in response to a media query.

Mr Ong was asked if Singapore has plans to introduce vaccine passports as a condition for travelling in or out of the country.

"I always felt that the concept of a vaccine passport is actually a bit of a misnomer," the minister said at the media conference held by the Covid-19 multi-ministry task force, which he co-chairs.

"It gives you the impression that, as with a passport, you can travel to many places. It actually wouldn't work like that."

He said that two regions would assess each other's risk profile, and if it is similar, they could form an air travel corridor, like the air travel bubble between Singapore and Hong Kong.

The travel bubble, which will allow quarantine-free travel between both cities, was originally slated to start on Nov 22 last year, but was pushed back to next Wednesday, and has now been postponed again, after a recent spike in Covid-19 cases here.

Mr Ong said such an arrangement starts with both sides recognising each other's vaccine certificates, after determining that good vaccines are administered under supervised conditions.

Then, both sides will have to decide on policies like whether the quarantine period should be done away with or cut short, among other details.

"What is more likely is a two-step process. No. 1, mutual recognition of vaccine certs, and No. 2, what to do with those vaccine certs, and you confer the appropriate restriction relaxations," Mr Ong said.

Singapore and Hong Kong are expected to announce a new launch date for the travel bubble towards the end of the current period of heightened alert here, which is due to last until June 13.

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People queuing at the visitor registration counter at Tan Tock Seng Hospital yesterday at around noon, the start of visiting hours. The hospital has progressively reopened for admissions after working to contain a Covid-19 cluster linked to it. For the next two weeks, it will allow one pre-registered visitor per patient, with a limit of one visit a day of up to 30 minutes. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

TTSH strengthens defences after containing cluster

Jessie Lim and Ang Qing

As Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) progressively reopened for admissions yesterday, it said it has strengthened defences but acknowledged that it will not be able to eliminate all risks.

"The risks to our front-line healthcare workers continue to be real and present," the hospital said in a Facebook post yesterday.

"Even with aggressive testing and monitoring, we can reduce but never eliminate all risks."

After a surge in Covid-19 commu-

nity cases linked to TTSH, the hospital said it worked with the Ministry of Health to contain the cluster – which has 46 cases as at Monday – to protect patients and staff.

The hospital said it will ramp up support to deal with ongoing community transmission of Covid-19.

On Monday, TTSH announced the move to resume admissions two weeks after it stopped admitting patients owing to the cluster.

"The last case of exposure in our wards was more than two weeks ago," the hospital said on Monday.

Since that last case, the TTSH-linked cases reported were already under active surveillance in isolation at the National Centre for Infec-

tious Diseases or under quarantine.

TTSH has completed six rounds of testing for all inpatients and two rounds for all 12,000 staff on campus. "We are not fully out of the woods just yet, but we are turning the corner," the hospital said yesterday.

At TTSH yesterday morning, nurses were seen wearing full personal protective equipment and N95 masks.

When The Straits Times visited the accident and emergency unit, there were about five people in the waiting area outside. No queues were seen at the patient registration kiosks.

For the next two weeks, the hos-

pital will allow one pre-registered visitor per patient, with a limit of one visit a day of up to 30 minutes.

Visitors of critically ill patients and those seeking medical treatment in the emergency department are also allowed.

Ms Lim Hwee San, who is in her 40s and declined to reveal her occupation, was at the hospital yesterday morning with her mother, who had broken her wrist after a fall.

When asked whether she was concerned about the TTSH cluster, Ms Lim said: "Both my mum and I are fully vaccinated and we don't see the cluster growing a lot in recent days. I presume the hospital must have conducted adequate

checks before opening."

A 70-year-old woman who said she was a retiree and gave her name only as Mrs Toh was relieved that her husband's appointments would not have to be rescheduled again.

He was scheduled for a CT scan of the colon in February, but it was cancelled twice as he had been feeling unwell.

"Every six months, he has a gastroenterology consultation so that the doctor can review his condition. We had to see the doctor urgently before his consultation on June 3," she said.

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