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Current measures adequate against new strains, say experts

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Amid growing concerns about a new strain of the coronavirus surfacing here, experts have said measures now in place, such as wearing masks and social distancing, are sufficient to combat its spread.

Two new strains of the coronavirus have been discovered, in Britain and South Africa. Malaysia's Health Ministry has also identified a new strain from samples taken in Sabah state.

The new B117 strain in Britain is reportedly 70 per cent more contagious, but has not shown signs of being more lethal or severe.

The first case of this strain here was recorded last Wednesday, in a 17-year-old Singaporean girl who had returned from Britain.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong from the Duke-NUS Medical School said the current measures were sufficient even with the new strains.

"I do not think there is a need for stricter measures. Even if the mutation increases the likelihood of spread, the modes of transmission remain the same.

"Control measures are tailored to the mode of transmission, not

the likelihood of spread," he said.

Infectious diseases specialist Leong Hoe Nam agreed the current safety measures in Singapore were adequate against the new strains.

"The virus has a weakness. It must infect via contact or droplet. Block those two effectively and the virus is rendered harmless."

Noting the various stringent measures in Singapore like SafeEntry, masks, social distancing and swab tests, Dr Leong said these should be considered not as separate methods but multiple layers of measures working together. He added that airport staff should be vigilant and stringent, following the discovery of the new strains.

From last Wednesday, all Singapore Airlines cabin crew members working on flights from London have had to wear N95 masks and protective overalls amid growing concerns about the new strain of the virus. Prior to this, cabin crew had been wearing goggles, gloves and surgical masks on all flights.

Discussing how the new strains affected vaccination plans, Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said it may now be important for more Singaporeans to get vaccinated against the coronavirus.

Speaking in a video interview with The Straits Times last Thursday, on its daily online talk show The Big Story, Prof Teo said: "This is the only way we can continue to ensure that the community as a whole is protected."

Instead of aiming to get 80 per cent of the population here vaccinated against Covid-19, "we may be now looking at 90 per cent or even higher", he said.

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang from the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health said the vaccine would still protect against the new Covid-19 strains.

"The risk of mutation for coronaviruses is far lower than viruses such as flu. Thus far, the new strains have not mutated to the extent that vaccines are not able to protect against them."

When asked if vaccination should be made compulsory, Prof Ooi disagreed and said there should instead be "clear dissemination of facts and information about vaccines and how they work, as well as a dialogue between the health authorities and the Singapore population to address any concerns on Covid-19 vaccines and myths".

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