



Israel Handling Of Omicron Being Watched Worldwide, It Hits Record Cases



Jerusalem, Undefined: Israel's response to the Covid pandemic has been closely watched worldwide, notably for its rapid vaccine rollout and early decision to offer booster shots before there was broad scientific support for a third dose. The country is now confronting an unprecedented caseload fuelled by the Omicron variant, with more than 37,000 new cases reported Tuesday, shattering previous records. Among those infected was Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who told public radio on Tuesday that he was in good health and isolating at home.

Despite the surge in cases, the Israeli government has so far avoided reimposing lockdowns and most other restrictions, insisting it can manage an infection wave with a peak that may still be weeks away.

What is the strategy?

Shortly after the Omicron variant was first detected in South Africa in November, Israel heavily curbed international travel. Cyrille Cohen, a life sciences professor at Bar Ilan University near Tel Aviv, described this as "a good move", which delayed large-scale local transmission and bought time to prepare for the coming wave, including by securing Covid treatment supplies.

But he said Israel did not use this time to adequately boost testing capacity, a fact now driving public frustration. With domestic transmission surging and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett forecasting between two million and four million infections in the weeks ahead, Israel concluded that travel restrictions would do little other than harm the economy.

It has both reopened its skies and allowed bars, restaurants, gyms, houses of worship and other facilities to stay open. Cohen told AFP that Israel has effectively "transferred some of the management of this crisis from the authorities to the people", giving primary responsibility to residents to self-test and quarantine. Bennett said Tuesday that "Israel is following three guiding principles: keep our economy open, protect the most vulnerable folks in society -- elders -- and to take care of our children." "We have difficult weeks ahead, but there is no need to panic," he told reporters.

What are the risks?

Hagai Levine, chairman of the Israeli Association of Public Health Physicians, told AFP that Israel's decision to "continue with normal life" will inevitably result in "many contaminations". Levine backed the decision to avoid a fresh lockdown but said the government would face problems if it continues to announce policy adjustments on a near daily basis.

Levine said about the current strategy that "the main risk is political". "Changing the policy continuously causes confusion and a feeling that the government is not in control, which is true, because it's not possible to be in control" of the Omicron wave, he said. Amid concern that spreading cases and mandatory isolation would stress the labour force, especially in the healthcare system, the health ministry announced Tuesday that people who test positive will be allowed to leave quarantine after seven days, instead of 10, if they are asymptomatic.

Fourth shot for all?

More than 80 percent of Israel's adult residents have received two coronavirus vaccine shots and more than half have also been given a booster. Bennett said last month that Israel also intended to be a trailblazer in administering a fourth shot to combat Omicron. Certain at-risk groups now have access to a fourth shot, even if scientific evidence on its impact remains scant. "Israel is open to doing things based on rationale without scientific proof," Levine said. "This is sometimes worth it -- as was the case with the first and third jab, which were administered quickly and, looking back, this paid off."

Preliminary data from Israel's Sheba Medical Center indicate a significant antibody boost in those given a fourth shot. But Cohen stressed it was too early to reach any conclusions about the import of another booster. "I can understand the decision to allow it for people that are at risk," he said, but he added: "We don't know if it will make a difference compared to three shots." (Source: NDTV)

Rapid Surge In Sale of Covid Self-test Kits



The Omicron-led spike in Covid-19 cases has turned out to be a boon for RAT or rapid antigen test kit makers, with people buying self-test kits to test at home. This has, however, also led to concerns of possible under-reporting, as many users who may have tested Covid positive, may not have uploaded their results with the appropriate authority. And this absence in reporting could mask the real numbers and magnitude of the infection, experts said.

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The phenomenal increase in home-testing came up at the weekly Health Ministry briefing on Thursday, with the Indian Council of Medical Research Director General, Balram Bhargava, pointing out that, while 3000-odd home tests had been conducted in all of 2021, the first 20 days of 2022 had seen about 2 lakh home test kits being used. Though there are several companies producing RAT kits and selling it to labs or government agencies for conducting tests, there are a handful of manufacturers who are presently manufacturing and distributing these self-test kits direct to consumers. Neeraj Gupta, Co-founder and CEO of Genes2Me Pvt Ltd, said that ICMR mandated manufacturers to develop the infrastructure for reporting the numbers to the authorised agency for collating the data. Accordingly, kit makers have developed an app which needs to be downloaded on the individual's mobile phone. The customer has to scan the QR code for registering the kit. After concluding the test, the customer is required to take the picture of the cassette and load it on the app which makes it "traceable and trackable".

"The way the app is designed the result, once uploaded by the customer, will go to ICMR portal. However, some customers may skip the last step thereby leading to under reporting of numbers," Gupta told BusinessLine. Genes2Me has received the ICMR approval and plans to roll out its self-test for consumers early next week. Aviral Roy, Consultant, Critical Care, Medica Superspecialty Hospital, points out that India has been reporting close to three lakh new Covid-19 cases on a daily basis, but actual numbers are likely to be much higher at around five-to-six lakh. "Not everyone who takes the test feels responsible to report the same or isolate themselves and follow all protocols," Roy said indicating, this might pose a challenge for policy makers while formulating decisions. According to Gupta a way out for ensuring compliance would be making Aadhaar linking mandatory while registering the kits by the customer, as this will ensure more efficient data capturing and help plug the loopholes. Sometimes customers may face difficulties in downloading the app and thereby may skip registering the kit altogether. "I had bought a self-test kit around 10 days back as I had symptoms of Covid. Though I tried downloading the app on my phone it was not happening and hence I just went ahead and tested myself and since I was positive quickly isolated myself," Atanu Das, a 39-year old marketing professional said.

Companies manufacturing the kits have seen 100-500 per cent growth in sales over the last fortnight. Saurabh Gupta, Head of Strategy, Mylab Discovery Solutions, said they have been witnessing 5X growth in sales on a week-on-week basis. The Maharashtra-based company manufactures CoviSelf. "There are a little over 3000 NABL accredited labs for conducting RTPCR RNA tests including government, private and international in India. On an average each of these labs can conduct 200-300 tests per day. So when the cases witness a spike then there will be additional pressure on labs and the testing and reporting may take longer. With the self-test kits people can get to know the result almost instantly. We have been witnessing phenomenal demand for these kits over the last 15-20 days," Gupta said. But there is a drawback, say experts, as the kit gives false negative results. So, if a person has symptoms but gets a negative result on the RAT kit, they need to go for an RT-PCR to be fully sure. The sensitivity of most of these kits is about 50-70 per cent, experts said. (Source: Business Line)

Rapid Surge In Sale of Covid Self-test Kits

Dire blood shortage has forced doctors to delay critical blood transfusions for people in need. The Red Cross and the National Football League have teamed up to offer those who come to give a chance to win a trip to super bowl. There is a blood shortage in the United States of America as the Omicron virus lays siege across homes and hospitals throughout the country.

The American Red Cross Society has urgently called for people to donate blood, calling all donors to donate blood in a 'Blood Crisis' on its home page. Alongside the call is a droplet, less than a quarter of which is in red, to illustrate the shortage.

The blood appeal cries aloud 'national blood crisis' on the home page of the American Red Cross. It says, "the Red Cross is experiencing the worst blood shortage in over a decade. The dangerously low blood supply levels have forced some hospitals to defer patients from major surgery, including organ transplants. Your donation is desperately needed." "Doctors have been forced to make difficult decisions about who receives blood transfusions and who will need to wait," the American Red Cross has said.

Red Cross blood banks rely on voluntary blood donations. To incentivise and encourage people to come forward, the Red Cross has teamed up with the National Football League to offer donors a chance to win a trip to the NFL super bowl. According to American Red Cross, there has been a 10 per cent decline in overall blood donation since March 2020. A principal driver of this decline is a 62 per cent drop in college and high school blood drives due to the pandemic. Student donors, who have accounted for about a fourth of all donors in 2019, accounted for just around 10 per cent during the pandemic. January blood donations are usually low – but is lower this year. Ongoing blood drive have also faced cancellations due to illness, weather-related closures and staffing limitations, the Red Cross has said.

Additional factors like a surge of COVID-19 cases and an active flu season may have compounded the already bad situation. American Red Cross, which supplies 40 per cent of the nation's blood supply, has had to limit blood product distributions to hospitals as a result of the shortage. In fact, some hospitals may not receive one in four blood products they need. Blood shortages in January are not unusual. Blood donation dips because people are vacationing and this is also when potential donors have a bout of common flu. People also tend to remain indoors during the winter months. But this year's shortage is critical. January is also observed as the national blood donation month throughout the US. (Source: OWSA)

New Oxford Trial to Gather More Data on Side Effects, Benefits of anti-Covid Pill Molnupiravir: Expert



The United Kingdom is set to roll out another trial to generate more data on the benefits and side effects of anti-Covid pill molnupiravir, Dr Mahendra G Patel, one of the national leads for the PANORAMIC study at the University Of Oxford, told News18.com.

The UK was the first country to licence the antiviral after which it was approved by other top-notch drug regulators including the United States FDA. On the same lines, the Drug Controller General of India endorsed the pill on December 28.

However, on January 5, the chief of India's largest medical research institute, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), raised doubts on the safety profile of the drug and restricted it from becoming part of the country's Covid-19 treatment protocol. In a weekly press briefing, ICMR director-general Dr Balram Bhargava said that "the drug has major safety concerns". Commenting on the development, Dr Patel said, "Early efficacy data in countries outside the UK have shown significant benefits with its use, reducing hospitalisation by as much as 30%. However, these results were in an unvaccinated population."

He added that "the trial will help bring clarity on the benefits in terms of improved symptom recovery, reduced hospitalisation as well as any side effects or adverse effects that may be reported". The study is significant as molnupiravir will be tested among clinically vulnerable populations found positive with the early symptoms of Covid-19. Parallely, the trial will end up generating important data on the efficacy of the drug on the vaccinated population apart from indicating its effectiveness against the latest fast-spreading variant of the virus, Omicron.

The antiviral, hailed by many as a "game changer", introduces errors into the coronavirus's genetic code, which prevents it from further replicating. So far, the drug has only been tested among unvaccinated populations.

"The trial also allows evaluation of the drug's effect against the newer variants such as Omicron which in the UK is now the most dominant," Dr Patel said, adding, "It aims to establish how molnupiravir compares to usual care and help reduce hospitalisation in a UK population which is now majorly vaccinated." The trial recruits those aged 50 and above or anyone aged 18 and above who have any underlying conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, etc, which can increase the chances of becoming severely ill.

The trial – which is the UK government's national high priority study led by the Oxford University's Primary Care Clinical Trials Unit – has already recruited over 2,700 patients since its launch in early December. Its objective is to recruit 10,600 patients who tested positive for Covid. The larger objective of the trial is to explore the effectiveness of novel antiviral agents for the early treatment of Covid-19 in the community. It will also test Pfizer's oral antiviral Paxlovid.

According to Dr Patel, who is an academic pharmacist, the results of the trial will be available in the shortest possible time. "Being a platform trial there is no compulsion to wait till the end of recruitment because once there is significant evidence in terms of its benefits or otherwise (with results analysed independently on a regular basis), the effectiveness of the treatment can be announced with the necessary and appropriate recommendations," he explained. "If the drug is effective, the sooner the data is gathered, the sooner it can be considered as to how it may be deployed to those most in need."

The PANORAMIC trial, he said, "will include other licensed antiviral agents over the coming months with Pfizer's Paxlovid now licenced and the next to be evaluated".

ICMR's Dr Bhargava had also said that molnupiravir can cause abnormalities in the development of children, if consumed during pregnancy or by those planning conception.

According to Dr Patel, who is also a visiting professor of pharmacy at the University of Bradford, the planned trial in the UK excludes pregnant women and those who are breastfeeding, "as there has been some evidence of teratogenic influences albeit in very few instances".

The trial also includes only those people of reproductive age who confirm the adoption of the strictest possible contraception measure.

However, he added, that so far there is no solid evidence of teratogenic influences. "Also, to highlight that the MOVE-OUT study, a phase III double-blind, randomised placebo-controlled trial, reported molnupiravir to be effective in the treatment of Covid-19 without evident safety concerns with its results published in the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)," said Dr Patel. Teratogenicity means the capability of a medicine to cause foetal abnormalities or disturb the formation of a foetus or an embryo when taken by pregnant women, consciously or unconsciously. (Source: News18)

1 in 3 Die': Wuhan Scientists Warn of New Coronavirus 'NeoCov' With High Death, Infection Rate, Says Report



Scientists from China's Wuhan, where the Covid-19 virus was first discovered in 2019, have warned of a new type of coronavirus 'NeoCov' in South Africa, stated to have a high death and transmission rate, according to a report by the Russian news agency *Sputnik*.

However, according to the report, the NeoCov virus is not new. Associated with the MERS-CoV virus, it was discovered in outbreaks in Middle Eastern countries in 2012 and 2015 and is similar to the the SARS-CoV-2, which causes coronavirus in humans. While NeoCoV was discovered in a bat population in South Africa and has only been known to spread among these animals, a new unpeered study published as a preprint on the bioRxiv website discovered that NeoCoV and its close relative PDF-2180-CoV can infect humans.

According to researchers from Wuhan University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Biophysics, only one mutation is required for the virus to infiltrate human cells. The research findings stated that the novel coronavirus poses a risk because it binds to the ACE2 receptor differently than the coronavirus pathogen. As a result, neither antibodies nor protein molecules produced by people with respiratory diseases or who have been immunised can protect against NeoCoV.

According to Chinese researchers, NeoCoV carries the potential combination of MERS-high CoV's mortality rate (one in every three infected person dies) and the current SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus's high transmission rate. Following a briefing on NeoCoV, experts from the Russian State Virology and Biotechnology Research Center issued a statement on Thursday, the report stated. "The Vector research centre is aware of the data obtained by Chinese researchers on the NeoCoV coronavirus. At the moment, the issue is not the emergence of a new coronavirus capable of actively spreading among humans," it said, adding that the potential risks outlined needed to be studied and probed further. (Source: NDTV)

Budget 2022: Pharma Sector Seeks Greater Fund Allocation



New Delhi: The domestic pharmaceutical industry is expecting an increase in the overall fund allocation for the healthcare sector, focus on policies that encourage research and development (R&D) activities and continuation of tax concessions on various drugs in the upcoming union budget.

The industry is also seeking simplification of various processes in order to enhance ease of doing business for the private sector companies. "An increase in the budgetary allocation from the current 1.8 per cent of the GDP to 2.5-3 per cent, as envisaged in the National Health Policy 2017 along with a separate allocation for the bio-pharmaceutical sector R&D is imperative," Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI) president S Sridhar said.

The industry saw significant momentum over the past year, especially in ensuring access to Covid-19 vaccines and medicines and this year's budget will be crucial to accelerate sectoral growth and access to innovative health solutions across various diseases and not Covid alone, he added.

Mr Sridhar noted that the government should continue with the existing Customs duty concessions for medicines as any discontinuation thereof in the current scenario will impact the accessibility of such medicines at affordable price. Import duty exemptions for rare diseases innovator drugs developed globally, as proposed by the NPRD should also be taken into consideration, he added.

"Additional measures towards improving ease of doing business in the pharma sector with emphasis on simplification and making the process industry friendly, with specific provisions for eliminating bottlenecks will encourage investment, thus, contributing to the long-term growth of the industry," Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA) Secretary General Sudarshan Jain said adding that for the knowledge-driven pharmaceutical industry, innovation and R&D is critical.

"This will help in meeting unmet patient needs in an affordable manner. We are looking forward to the budget that will help in fuelling innovation and advancing the Indian pharmaceutical industry from Make in India to Discover and Make in India," he added

Healthcare industry body NATHEALTH stated that in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic, it is crucial to create and build infra-structural and linked integrated capabilities like telemedicine, home and senior care so that people can access quality and critical healthcare services equitably.

"The pandemic has made us realise the need of providing hospitals in tier 2 and 3 towns with adequate infrastructure such as diagnostic centers, oxygen beds, ICUs and oxygen plants through increased budget outlay and greater investments. This will also help in creating employment opportunities and increase health system resilience," NATHEALTH president Harsh Mahajan said. The need of the hour is to allocate funds and introduce targeted skilling and medical education programmes which can address the shortage of skilled healthcare manpower in the nation, he added. (Source: NDTV)