

Grim warning over new Covid variant spreading in Australia ahead of Christmas

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Cases of a Covid-19 variant "rapidly" spreading across the world are rising in Australia, with one expert warning the latest wave over Christmas should be taken seriously.

The variant JN.1 first arrived in Australia in mid-October but in recent weeks cases have surged. Professor Brendan Crabb, Director and CEO of the Burnet Institute, said last month up to five million Australians could get Covid in the coming months, leading to "thousands of Australians dying early".

He told the ABC News Daily podcast while Covid-19 is no longer "an emergency", he feared Australia was far too casual about its assessment of the threat the virus poses to the community.



Australians are being urged to be mindful as a new Covid variant circulates. Source: Getty

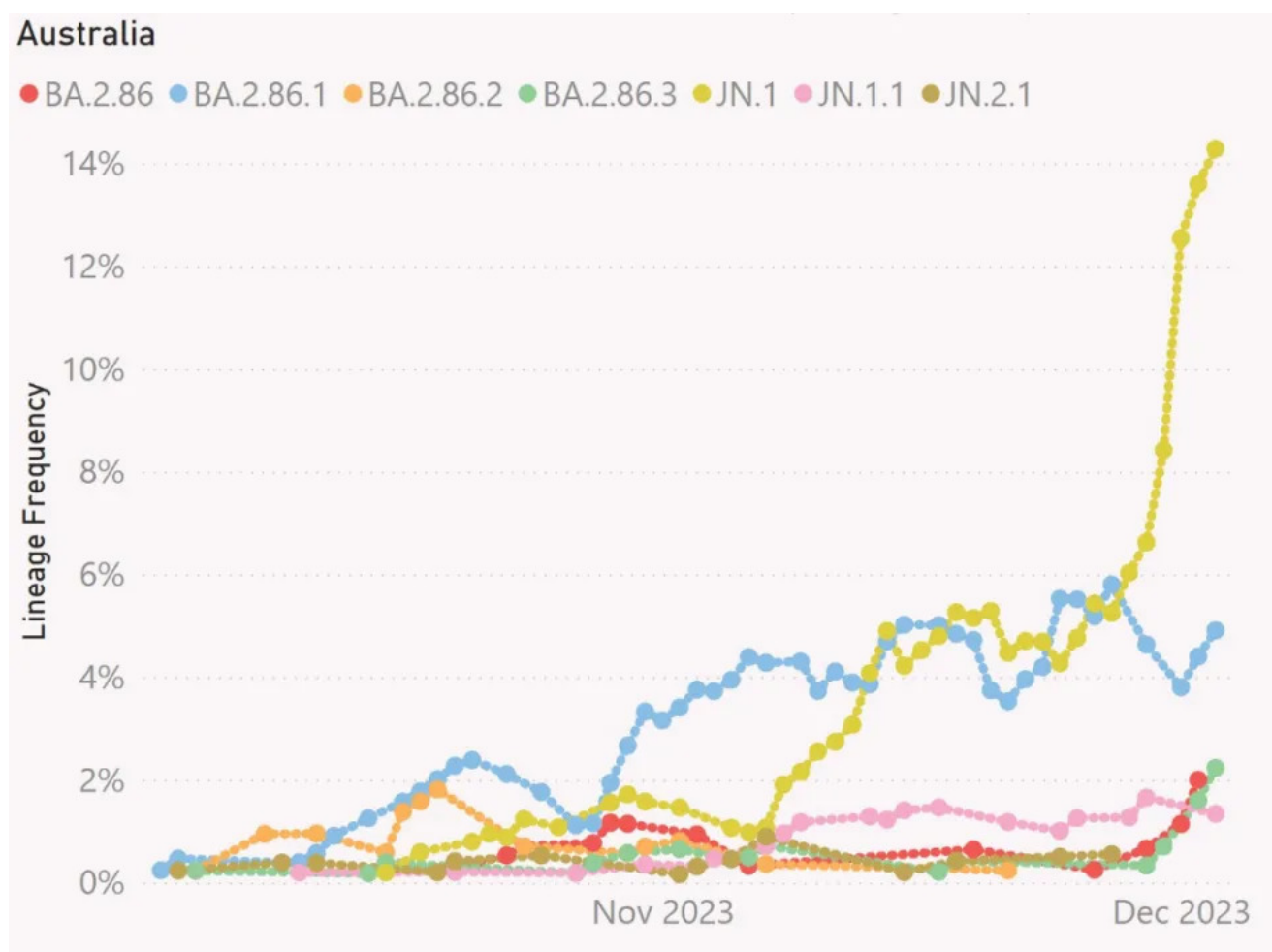
JN.1 becomes 'variant of interest'

The World Health Organisation has now classified the JN.1 variant as a "variant of interest". It was previously classified as a part of its parent lineage BA.2.86, which Prof Crabb said was a "radically different virus" to what has been seen before.

However several medical experts say it is not believed JN.1 will lead to more severe symptoms and disease. At least two experts told Reuters the variant can evade the immune system and transmit more easily than other circulating variants.

This week Prof Crabb called for stronger public health messaging from state governments in Australia after noting the impact JN.1 had on hospitalisations in Singapore, which roughly trebled in the space of two weeks earlier this month.

A graph shared by Data Integration specialist Mike Honey shows how quickly JN.1 became the dominant sub-lineage of its parent strain BA.2.86 in Australia – a similar pattern to a host of countries around the world. BA.2.86 was first detected in Australia in September.



JN.1 quickly became the most dominant BA.2.86 sub-variant in late November. It is now recognised as its own variant. Source: Mike Honey/ Twitter

Australians 'over Covid measures'

According to Pfizer's latest COVID community sentiment index, Australians are becoming blasé about Covid vaccinations and safety measures as the pandemic drags on.

It found 33 per cent of Australians do not think COVID measures, such as wearing masks, hand sanitisation and social distancing, are important for protection against the disease.

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A third also did not believe staying up to date with vaccinations was important, and 64 per cent thought new COVID-19 variants would not have a significant impact on them in a year's time.

Infectious diseases paediatrician Robert Booy urged Australians to resist complacency ahead of the holiday season.

"As much as we would all like to forget about Covid-19, Covid-19 is not done with us," the University of Sydney professor said.

"Evidence shows that the disease continues to evolve and have significant impact in our communities, especially those at higher risk of severe illness.

"With COVID-19 part of our new reality, we need to continue to embed some habits and measures to protect ourselves and our communities."

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