

MAINTAINING VIGILANCE WITH PRECAUTIONARY MOVES TO BETTER DETECT AND REDUCE RISK OF LOCAL TRANSMISSION OF THE OMICRON VARIANT

 **30TH NOV 2021**

1. In response to the emergence of a potentially more contagious variant of the COVID-19 virus, which has since been termed the Omicron variant, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF) announced on 26 November 2021 travel restrictions for affected countries/regions[1]. On 28 November 2021, we further deferred the launch of the Vaccinated Travel Lanes (VTLs) with countries that serve as transport nodes to the affected countries/regions[2]. These measures will help to reduce the risk of importation of the Omicron variant.

2. Thus far, no cases of the Omicron variant have been detected locally. However, more countries have reported cases over the past few days, suggesting that the variant has spread globally. As a highly vaccinated population with a strong booster programme currently in progress, our community would have some protection against this new variant. We are monitoring the situation closely, and checking with health authorities worldwide to determine the variant's characteristics. We will also take precautionary steps to reduce the probability of spread into Singapore, so that we can accumulate further knowledge about the variant, and how best to tackle it.

Update on Assessment of Omicron Variant

3. There has been a rapid increase in the proportion of cases that are infected by the Omicron variant in South Africa. As of 29 November 2021, the variant has been detected in at least 13 other countries, mainly from persons with recent travel history. More cases are expected globally as countries continue to enhance their surveillance for the variant. The overall COVID-19 incidence rate in South Africa remains low, but is increasing.

4. The MTF is monitoring the situation closely. In particular, we are looking out for more information on the Omicron variant – its transmissibility, incubation period and infectious duration, severity of illness, and the efficacy of existing vaccines. Some of the mutations found in the variant's genome were previously known to enhance transmissibility and reduce vaccine efficacy in other variants with these mutations. In terms of vaccine efficacy, early data suggests that current vaccines should remain effective against severe disease and death. However, more studies are needed to understand the actual impact of this variant on our existing countermeasures, including vaccines and treatments.

On-arrival PCR Test for All Travellers and Additional Antigen Rapid Tests for Travellers on Vaccinated Travel Lanes

5. To step up detection and containment of the Omicron variant until more information is available, we will enhance our testing protocols for travellers arriving in Singapore after **2 December 2021, 2359 hours (Singapore time)** (details in [Annex A \(https://www.moh.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider5/default-document-library/mtf-30-nov-press-release-annex-a.pdf?sfvrsn=5240f8dc_0\)](https://www.moh.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider5/default-document-library/mtf-30-nov-press-release-annex-a.pdf?sfvrsn=5240f8dc_0)). These enhanced measures will apply for four weeks in the first instance, and will be reviewed and extended if necessary.
6. All air travellers entering or transferring/transiting through Singapore, after **2 December, 2359 hours (Singapore time)**, including travellers from Category I countries/regions, must undergo a Pre-Departure Test (PDT)[3] within 2 days of their departure for Singapore and obtain a negative result. Those entering Singapore, including travellers from Category II (non-Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL)), III and IV countries, must undergo a COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test on-arrival[4].
7. With effect from **2 December, 2359 hours (Singapore time)**, air travellers on the Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL-Air) [5] who arrived after the cut-off date and time, will also have to undergo additional supervised self-administered Antigen Rapid Tests (ART) at a Quick Test Centre on Days 3 and 7 of their arrival. These measures will enable us to minimise importation and allow prompt detection and isolation of Omicron cases.

One-off Surveillance Testing Exercise for Travellers who Arrived from Affected Countries/Regions in Past Two Weeks

8. We are also conducting a one-time surveillance PCR testing exercise for travellers who arrived between 12 and 27 November 2021 and had travelled to the countries/regions affected by Omicron[1] in the 14 days before their arrival in Singapore. These travellers have been notified of their scheduled test time and venue. We seek the understanding and cooperation of affected travellers for the testing exercise.

PCR RRT for Affected Border Frontline Workers

9. Our borders are the first line of defence against importation of the Omicron variant. Hence, as a precautionary measure, from **2 December 2021** we will revert to a weekly PCR Rostered Routine Testing (RRT) for airport and other border frontline workers who may come into contact with travellers from countries/regions affected by the Omicron variant. A PCR-based test will facilitate the detection of the Omicron variant.
10. For aircrew serving flights from these countries, they will be subjected to an on-arrival PCR test, and post-arrival PCR tests on Days 3 and 7 following each flight duty. Other airport and border frontline workers will continue with ART-based RRT. As an added precaution, such individuals presenting a positive ART will have to go for a confirmatory PCR test. All border frontline workers, including recovered persons, will need to undergo the RRT. This will allow us to better detect potential cases infected with the Omicron variant at our border in a timely manner.

Enhanced Management of Confirmed and Suspected Omicron cases

11. Cases confirmed or suspected to be infected with the Omicron variant will not be allowed to undergo home recovery, and instead be conveyed to the National Centre for Infectious Diseases for isolation and management. We will also conduct full contact tracing for these cases to identify their close contacts, place them on a 10-day quarantine at Government Quarantine Facilities instead of allowing self-isolation at home, and conduct PCR testing at the start and at the end of their quarantine.

Update on Travel Advisory

12. All residents of Singapore are advised to defer all travel to higher risk countries/regions, that include Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe until further notice. In addition, we encourage travellers who visit countries/regions with reported cases of the Omicron variant or countries with high traffic volume to these higher risk countries/regions to take extra precaution, including wearing masks, and observing good personal hygiene and SMMs even if these requirements are not required there. This will protect you during this period of uncertainty.

Maintaining Vigilance Against New Variant

13. We are introducing a set of measures that serves as a strong yet reasonable response to the new variant to protect our local community. We will continue to monitor and evaluate data on the Omicron variant as it emerges and adjust our border and domestic measures accordingly. We seek Singaporeans' understanding and support in the coming weeks as calibration to our measures may need to be introduced quickly given the fluidity of the situation.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

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[1] Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Please refer to the [Press Release \(https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/updates-on-border-measures-for-travellers-from-botswana-eswatini-lesotho-mozambique-namibia-south-africa-and-zimbabwe\)](https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/updates-on-border-measures-for-travellers-from-botswana-eswatini-lesotho-mozambique-namibia-south-africa-and-zimbabwe) on 26 November 2021.

[2] Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Please refer to the [Press Release \(https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/deferment-of-vaccinated-travel-lanes-with-qatar-saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates\)](https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/deferment-of-vaccinated-travel-lanes-with-qatar-saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates) on 28 November 2021.

[3] Either a Reverse Transcriptase Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test or a professionally administered Antigen Rapid Test (ART) result will be accepted as a valid PDT for countries/regions in Category I – III. Only RT-PCR test results will be accepted as a valid PDT for Category IV countries/regions.

[4] To expedite on-arrival testing, travellers should register and make payment for their on-arrival PCR tests prior to departing for Singapore at <https://safetravel.changiairport.com/arrivalswabtest/#/> (<https://safetravel.changiairport.com/arrivalswabtest/#/>)

[5] Separate measures will apply to VTL travellers via land links with Malaysia, who will be subject to an on-arrival ART only. The risk of importation via the VTL-Land arrangement is mitigated by the travel restrictions Malaysia has imposed on countries/regions affected by Omicron, and the restriction of eligibility to citizens, permanent residents or long-term pass holders of both countries in the initial phase.

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