



BE AWARE: Prof Salim Abdool Karim, former head of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee.

Picture: JACKIE CLAUSEN

Be vigilant, advises Prof Karim on Covid-19 sub-variant

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Epidemiologist and former head of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee Prof Salim Abdool Karim says there is no reason to be concerned about the discovery of the new and highly infectious Covid-19 sub-variant XBB.1.5.

This comes after the first confirmed case in South Africa caused by the sub-variant, nicknamed "kraken", was detected by Stellenbosch University.

It has been described by the World Health Organisation as "the most transmissible sub-variant" found so far in the pandemic.

Speaking on eNCA, Abdool Karim said the sub-variant is a new version or mutation of the Omicron variant.

He urged South Africans not to panic, but to remain vigilant.

"This is a new version of Omicron. It is a version that has the ability to escape antibodies, but that is with most of the new variants.

"It has descended from a variant we have already experienced in South Africa called BA.5. Because BA.5 has already caused a wave of infections, we have widespread immunity to it, and from vaccines and past infection, to the virus more generally," said Abdool Karim.

He said the sub-variant could cause a spike in infections at most and would not pose a serious threat.

"There is no need for any new measures to be taken, in my view. I would say there are things we should just continue to do and it has got nothing to do with XBB.1.5. Ensure you are fully vaccinated, do as much as you can outdoors and avoid indoor settings, maintain social distancing and put on a mask."

Virologist Prof Tulio de Oliveira, head of a gene-sequencing institute at Stellenbosch University, told the Sunday Times they are alert but not concerned about the XBB.1.5 mutation.

"You must understand it is not a new variant, as people are saying. It is part of the Omicron family. It is a mutation," De Oliveira said.

"We do not expect serious repercussions in South Africa. This is due to the high percentage of our population who are immunised.

"We are talking about more than 95% of the country, whether through vaccinations or previous infections. It is likely our wall of immunisation is strong enough to protect us," he said.

No spike in cases, hospitalisations, or deaths has been seen in SA so far, De Oliveira said.