

OMICRON

No need to panic over variant, vaccinate to stay safe – experts

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THE Department of Health has warned South Africans not to panic over the spread of the Omicron variant as the country was expecting and prepared for the fourth wave.

A media briefing was held yesterday by the Department of Health and following President Cyril Ramaphosa's address to the nation on Sunday night. At the briefing concerns were also raised about the rise of infections in young children and babies.

While a new variant and mutations were expected, scientists yesterday said they were still studying the effects and strength against the current vaccines.

Dr Salim Abdool Karim said they were quite amazed at how fast infections were rising but "we were not caught with our pants down".

"We expected and prepared for a new variant as far back as in September.

"The government then invested in building capacity to do genomic frequency and this early evidence has given us the best fighting chance against this new variant," he said.

Abdool Karim said that while there was still lack of evidence on whether current vaccines were effective against

the new variant, evidence should present itself over the next few weeks.

"But we do expect that vaccines should hold well against hospitalisation of those infected," he said.

He added that the biggest challenge would also be preventing superspreader events.

The scientists and department urged those who already vaccinated to motivate others to vaccinate and strictly follow preventative measures such as mask-wearing and washing of hands.

Minister of Health Joe Phaahla said the rise of infections served as a reminder there was a deadly virus and citizens should use what was "tried and tested" in preventing severe cases".

While over 16.5 million South Africans are fully vaccinated, the department said this was a "very small" number compared to unvaccinated people.

So far, early information shows that most Covid-19 patients admitted to hospital and experiencing severe symptoms are unvaccinated, the department said.

Phaahla held a detailed media briefing to further unpack the address by Ramaphosa and present a state of readiness to respond to the Omicron variant.

Information thus far showed most patients were presenting with similar symptoms as for other Covid-19 variants.

Scientists and experts who presented at the briefing said the Health Department may have to focus on paediatric hospital beds' preparedness in this fourth wave.

Providing an epidemiological update from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, Dr Waasila Jassat said Gauteng was the epicentre for the new variant. She said they had seen a sharp increase in infections over the last few days with most cases among the younger age groups of 10 to 9-year-olds.

She added that there has been an increased number of admissions in Tshwane and other regions in Gauteng were also on the increase.

The experts spoke out against the closing of borders to South Africa, saying that there was no science to support such decisions.

Phaahla, Abdool Karim and Department of International Relations and Co-operation spokesperson Clayson Monyela reiterated the government's frustration with the decision made by other countries.

Abdool-Karim indicated there was no benefit in closing the borders as the Omicron variant was detected in at least 11 other countries by yesterday.

Monyela said they had received reports from stranded South Africans.