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A booster shot is your best protection against new Covid variants

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In an interview with *Health-e News*, South African infectious disease expert Professor Salim Abdool Karim said current vaccines continue to offer protection against the COVID-19 Omicron sub-variant XBB.1.5, known as Kraken.

Increasing vaccine coverage

Karim said what was important was to increase [vaccine](#) coverage, especially among people with co-morbidities and older people.

“The questions are how do we improve our vaccine coverage, especially among older people, people with diabetes, hypertension, and heavier people? How do we get them vaccinated? That is what we should be concentrating on,” said Karim.

He added that everyone must get vaccinated as young people place their older counterparts at risk.

The expert said South Africa would likely see an increase in new Covid-19 infections due to XBB.1.5. But he believes the slight increase would not cause an alarming spike in severe cases or hospitalisations.

What to expect from COVID-19 this year

Karim warned the coronavirus could mutate in many ways, making it more infectious and able to bypass and evade antibody immunity. It has also shown it can create a new variant at any time.

“We are learning that this virus is not going to be static. It is going to continue to evolve, and it is going to continue to change, changing itself into new forms of the virus. We have no way of predicting that and so for all those reasons, this coming year is likely to be a year that will continue in the same vein as 2022. It remains an unpredictable virus.”

‘We are still living in a pandemic’

He said the country must ensure it is doing enough testing as we are still in a pandemic.

“We must make sure that we are sequencing enough viruses and that we are monitoring what variants they are. There are over a million infections daily in the world, and we have to ensure that we are doing what we can to minimise its impact in our country,” said Karim.

The [National Institute for Communicable Diseases \(NICD\)](#) has indicated that currently, no changes to the public health response are required, and individuals are encouraged to receive SARS-CoV-2 vaccinations and boosters.

Vaccination remains a priority

According to the WHO, as of 12 January 2023, South Africa has 4,050,288 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 102, 568 deaths reported. And as of 17 December 2022, a total of 38,036,993 vaccine doses have been administered.

“With older people, we have done reasonably well. We have just over 70% vaccine coverage, but we should do better. We should aim to get between 80 and 90% coverage among older people, and we should make sure that they get at least three doses of the vaccine,” said Karim.

He urged South Africans to take advantage of the health department’s planned vaccine drive.

“At this stage, my appeal is for anyone who has not had three doses of the vaccine to please go and get your vaccine.”

Covid-19 sequencing

Local scientists announced the detection of the sub-variant in the Western Cape after gene sequencing was completed on a sample from 27 December. The World Health Organisation (WHO) said from the end of October until 11 January 2023, over 5 000 sequences of the Omicron XBB.1.5 subvariant were reported from 38 countries.

Although XBB.1.5 is currently dominant in the United States, scientists believe it's not behind the surge in cases in China. Since dropping its strict restrictions in the second half of last year, the country has seen an alarming rise in cases with over 5 000 deaths daily.

Meanwhile, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, recently warned that the drop in the number of sequences being shared poses a danger. He said since the peak of Omicron, the number of sequences being shared dropped by over 90%.

"The world cannot close its eyes and hope this virus will disappear. It will not. Sequencing remains vital to detect and track the emergence and spread of new variants such as XBB.1.5. We urge all countries now experiencing intense transmission to increase sequencing and to share those sequences," said Ghebreyesus. – *Health-e News*

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