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HEALTH

# Omicron less severe – fifth wave to come

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EXPERTS believed that while Omicron is more transmissible, it is less severe than other Covid-19 variants.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla confirmed at the beginning of December that the country's fourth wave was in full swing and driven by Omicron.

According to data from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, the wave's peak has seemingly come and gone. In the seven-day build-up to December 17, there were an average 23 000 new cases being recorded. However, by December 27 the number had plummeted to 14 390 cases.

Infectious diseases epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim said a new variant and a fifth wave were expected, as with the previous waves of infections.

"Covid-19 has a cyclical nature which we have a good understanding of, but we cannot make predictions with 100% certainty on how the virus will behave. We knew the fourth wave would occur during December and there would be a new variant, but no one saw Omicron coming.

"We predict that the fifth wave will occur between May and June, and there would likely be another variant, but with vaccines it will be milder than Omicron," he said.

Abdool Karim said Omicron was less severe. "It's a cascade. We look at how many new cases, deaths and hospitalisations followed by symptoms, as well as how many people require oxygen and intensive care.

"So far, we know that Omicron can spread faster but is overall less severe. Most people are asymptomatic, and Omicron does not cause the loss of smell and taste," he said.

The Sisonke Study vaccine trial for health-care workers conducted research that found the Omicron variant was more infectious compared to Beta and Delta. The trial was the precursor to the country's national vaccination roll-out and saw health-care workers vaccinated with the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine.

Professor Linda-Gail Bekker and Glenda Gray were co-lead investigators of the study and were involved in the research released on December 21.

It was discovered that the breakthrough infections of health-care workers were less severe than Beta and Delta.

Breakthrough infections were monitored by researchers who collected data from the Covid-19 Notifiable Medical Conditions Sentinel Surveillance list and National Population Register by the SA Medical Research Council.

Fewer health-care workers infected with Omicron required high care and intensive care. Professor Cheryl Cohen, head of the National Institute for Communicable Disease's Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis, and her colleagues conducted an early assessment of Omicron's severity.

They assessed two comparisons. The findings were posted online to the preprint server medRxiv on December 21.

For the first comparison, the team learned that individuals with Omicron infections were significantly less likely to be admitted to hospital compared to those with Delta. It was an overall reduction of about 80%.

The second part of the analysis revealed that Omicron infections were linked with a 70% lower chance of severe disease compared to Delta infections.