

# China's Lockdown Offers Reminder That 5th Wave Is Expected

COVID-19

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China's lockdown of 25 million people in Shanghai as part of its COVID Zero policy is being viewed as a reminder that the pandemic is ongoing and public health experts must prepare for a fifth wave of infections. REUTERS

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While most of the world has eased pandemic-related restrictions, China is locking back down as it confronts a new round of COVID-19 infections driven by a subvariant of the omicron strain. That lockdown is a reminder to African countries that they must be prepared for a fifth wave..

African leaders continue to urge residents to take precautions against spreading COVID-19, which remains active in low numbers after the latest omicron-driven wave ended about a month ago in much of the continent. Mask-wearing, hand-washing and social distancing remain key components of the strategy to disrupt the virus's ability to move through populations.

Officials have dropped strict lockdowns as a tool for breaking transmission because earlier lockdowns had devastating effects on national economies.

Increasing immunity – both natural and acquired – could blunt the impact of a new variant, but there's no guarantee a new variant can be held in check completely, South African epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim told Jacaranda FM radio. Omicron, delta and other major variants all showed they could overcome certain levels of immunity.

“That is the uncertainty we have to work with in this pandemic,” Karim said.

The World Health Organization’s Africa regional office and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention have emphasized a bottom-up strategy. Building on experience fighting previous outbreaks, the strategy focuses on tracking COVID-19 in communities and using a combination of tightly focused lockdowns and treating “rings” of close contacts of infected people to stop outbreaks before they can become epidemic.

China, on the other hand, continues to pursue its policy known as COVID Zero to block the spread.

This month, the government locked down the city of Shanghai, which has a population of 25 million. Authorities are testing each person in the city and isolating those with the virus in improvised hospitals. Testing has shown tens of thousands of infections. Nearly all those infected are asymptomatic, according to Reuters.

Beyond Shanghai, testing turned up a new variation, omicron XE, that is a hybrid (also known as a recombinant) of the highly infectious BA.1 and BA.2 strains of the omicron variant. The new subvariant is about 10% more transmissible than BA.2, according to the WHO.

China has also reported two other variations that are not listed in the international database of COVID-19 strains.

“We should monitor the new recombinants closely, but we should not panic at the moment,” said Leo Poon, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong, told Bloomberg.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO’s technical lead for COVID-19, said researchers around the world are studying omicron XE and other variants to determine what the virus’s changes mean.

“We are analyzing this with all available information that we have, and we will continue to do so,” Van Kerkhove said during a recent briefing.

In the meantime, she urged, people need to continue to take precautions to prevent further spread of COVID-19.

“This virus is still with us. It’s circulating at a really intense level,” Van Kerkhove said. “We need to use all of the tools that we have at our disposal.”