First case of new Covid variant confirmed in SA, experts urge for calm

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THE Department of Health has confirmed that the first case of the XBB.1.5 variant, which some have dubbed “Kraken”, has been detected in South Africa, and that they are meeting the scientific community to gather more information about it.

The variant was first detected in South Africa, a descendant of Omicron, the most contagious variant of the virus.

The XBB.1.5 variant case in South Africa was detected by genome sequencing carried out by researchers at Stellenbosch University, and internationally was given the nickname “Kraken” (a sea monster in Scandinavian folklore) as it is said to be more transmissible than the other variants.

However, medical experts said there was no reason to panic over the variant.

Professor Niki Garrett, head of the Centre for Epidemiology Response and Innovation at Stellenbosch University, said the XBB.1.5 variant case had been detected through genome sequencing and the report on it was submitted to the Department of Health on Friday.

“How it works is we sequence the genome of the Covid-19 virus itself, and from there we are able to identify mutations and the exact variant that is circulating in South Africa across various parts of the country,” Garrett said.

“We discovered that it is still the Omicron variant in circulation, but now a sub-variants of Omicron identified as XBB.1.5 has been detected.”

Garrett added that XBB.1.5 is responsible for a surge in Covid-19 infections on the east coast of America.

“We have only detected one case of XBB.1.5 variant from 100 samples, which means it is at a very low prevalence. At the moment, we don’t have any concerns that this will fuel another wave of infections.”

“If there is an increase in the prevalence of this variant that leads to more hospitalisation, we will inform the Department of Health, but at the moment we feel this is highly unlikely and there is no reason to be concerned,” Garrett said.

De Oliveira said Covid-19 vaccines currently in circulation would still be effective in dealing with XBB.1.5.

“We believe in the protection that is going to be given by the vaccines that are now available. We are also monitoring any data on severity, or a clinical picture of its impact.”

It said that it saw no indication that its severity had changed but that increased transmissibility is always a concern.

“Are we not expecting another wave of infections or any restrictions to be modelled, but if you are concerned, it is advisable to get a booster vaccine to ensure that you are not infected with XBB.1.5 variant.”

Professor Niki Garrett, head of HIV and vaccine research at the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Southern Africa, said the XBB.1.5 variant case would cause severe disease.

“Despite the concerns that we have noted that there has been a big drop over the last six months in the number of people testing for Covid-19 and the number of people taking Covid-19 vaccines.”

“However, due to the number of people who have been vaccinated in South Africa, we can expect severe infections. It is likely that the new variant would cause severe disease.”

Garrett said he would advise anyone who is at risk of severe disease to ensure they take a Covid-19 booster every six months, or at least once a year.

“Is in the age group of people over 60 or people with pre-existing conditions that would advise them to take Covid-19 boosters. We must remember that the more people who have been vaccinated, the more local immunity we have, so don’t know in which direction the pandemic is headed.”

Forbe Mbhez, spokesperson for the Department of Health, said the department would be meeting scientists to gather more information on the XBB.1.5 variant after detecting the first case of the variant.

“We will talk to our scientific community on how transmissible and potentially severe disease we will also establish if there was any need in the confirmed XBB.1.5 variant. We will issue an official statement in due course.”

The World Health Organization’s senior epidemiologist Mari van Kerkhove said last week that XBB.1.5 is the most transmissible Omicron sub-variant that has been detected so far.

It spreads rapidly because of the mutations it contains, allowing it to adhere to cells and replicate easily.

The variant does not appear to cause more severe illness or require hospitalisation any more than previously identified Omicron sub-variants, she said.

The variant is not new, it is a re-emergence of the sub-variant XBB.1.5, she said.

It said that it saw no indication that its severity had changed but that increased transmissibility is always a concern.