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Advisory on measures to control COVID-19 following lifting of COVID-19 regulations

As of 22 June 2022, numbers of SARS-CoV-2 infections continue to decrease in South Africa, following the recent resurgence associated with the emergence of the Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants in South Africa. While numbers of cases and percentage testing positive did increase in this resurgence, the decoupling of numbers of hospitalisations and deaths from cases, first observed in the Omicron BA.1 wave continued(1).

Substantially lower numbers of hospitalisations and deaths were observed in this resurgence compared to any previous wave including the Omicron BA.1 wave(2). High levels of population immunity are likely a major contributor to the reduction in the burden of severe illness and death in South Africa, with a recent study by the South African National Blood Service estimating that 98% of South Africans have detectable antibodies to SARS-CoV-2. These antibodies are a result of infection, vaccination or a combination of the two(3).

In the context of high population immunity and lower disease severity the decision has been made to lift the COVID-19 regulations implemented as part of the National State of Disaster. However, it is important to keep in mind that SARS-CoV-2 will continue to circulate in the community, and therefore the potential for new variants or subvariants to emerge, and in turn cause surges in the number of cases exists. Therefore, continued monitoring of the SARS-CoV-2 trends and changes in early warning system indicators is important.

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) will continue to monitor the trends in number of SARS-CoV-2 tests performed, the positivity rate and number of cases. In addition, the trends in COVID- 19-related admissions and deaths will be monitored through the DATCOV hospital surveillance programme. We will also continue to monitor levels of SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater. Should there be any trend in these data suggesting a potential resurgence, the National Department of Health, NICD and others will be alerted to the early warning signals from the above surveillance programmes, and take early action to inform appropriate public health response.

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Recommendations for control of COVID-19 following the lifting of COVID-19 regulations

Vaccination is the most effective method for preventing and controlling severe COVID-19, and people eligible for COVID-19 vaccines must get vaccines and boosters as indicated in the national programme. A South African study found that among individuals vaccinated with the Ad26.COV2.S (Johnson & Johnson–Janssen) vaccine, the vaccine effectiveness against hospitalization for COVID-19 was 74% (95% confidence interval [CI], 57 to 84) at 14 to 27 days post vaccination, and 72% (95% CI, 59 to 81) at 1 to 2 months.

Among people receiving the BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech) vaccine, the vaccine effectiveness was, 88% (95% CI, 62 to 96) at 14 to 27 days post vaccination, 70% (95% CI, 64 to 76) at 1 to 2 months, 71% (95% CI, 68 to 74) at 3 to 4 months, and 67% (95% CI, 63 to 71) at five months or longer indicating very high protection against severe disease.(4) The vaccine is safe and freely available to all South Africans aged ≥12 years. Even in people who have had previous infection with SARS-CoV-2, vaccination has been shown to confer substantial protective benefit against severe disease and death (5).

Individuals at increased risk of severe COVID-19

The following groups of individuals have an increased risk of severe COVID-19 illness (i.e. require hospitalisation, assistance to help them breathe, admission to intensive care unit or even die).

- Older individuals. The risk of severe illness increases with increasing age. **The risk increases for people in** their 50s and increases in 60s, 70s, and 80s. People aged 85 years and older are the most likely to get severe disease
- Individuals with chronic underlying conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, heart or lung disease, kidney or liver disease, neurologic disease, obesity
- People living with HIV, particularly individuals whose disease is not well controlled on antiretroviral treatment
- Individuals with tuberculosis
- People receiving immunosuppressive treatment, for example cancer
- Pregnant women

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General measures to prevent transmission of respiratory viruses including SARS-CoV-2

Individuals with respiratory illness should do the following to prevent onward transmission

- Stay at home until symptoms resolve
- Avoid close contact with others especially those at high risk for severe COVID-19 (see section above for individuals at risk of severe COVID-19)
- Avoid close contact such as kissing or sharing drinks
- Cover coughs and sneezes (cover mouth and nose with tissue or cough or sneeze into an elbow)
- Wash hands with soap and water or disinfect with an alcohol-based hand rub regularly
- Limit the number of visitors
- Wipe down surfaces that are frequently touched or shared (doorknobs, remote controls) with a standard household disinfectant

Individuals at increased risk of severe COVID-19 may wish to take additional precautions (in addition to receiving all recommended doses of COVID-19 vaccines) to reduce their risk of contracting COVID-19. These may include the following:

- Wearing a well-fitting mask when attending gatherings.
- Avoiding large gatherings, crowds and poorly ventilated spaces. The risk of transmission is much lower outdoors.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water
- If you develop an illness, seek medical care as soon as possible.

If South Africans intend to travel outside of South Africa, they must ensure they are aware of any requirements of the countries they travel to. Travellers should assess the COVID-19 transmission situation in countries where they travel to and manage risks accordingly.

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