



CORONA VIRUS VARIANT – OMICRON : ‘VARIANT OF CONCERN’
“VERY HIGH GLOBAL RISK”

The UN Health Agency has on 26th November 2021 declared the recently discovered new strain of COVID-19, first detected in Southern Africa, to be a ‘variant of concern’ and named it Omicron. Its emergence showed how perilous and precarious the situation is.

- The heavily mutated Omicron Coronavirus variant is likely to spread internationally and pose a very high risk of infection surges that could have “severe/serious consequences” globally (WHO).
- Found in travellers with history of travel to Southern Africa (Risk Countries: UK, South Africa, China, Mauritius, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Singapore, Hong Kong and Israel).
- The variant has 50 mutations, 32 relating to the spike protein.
- The large number mutations in the spike protein can affect the virus’s ability to spread and infect potentially making it a big threat. This could have implications for Vaccine efficacy and transmissibility.
- Omicron appears to be more transmissible than previous variants including to already vaccinated or prior infection.

Early indication is that symptoms are unusual but mild.

Its emergence has proved that transmissions of the virus in areas with low vaccination rates would speed its evolution.

Cause of Worry:

- In vaccinated persons, COVID-19 cases and infections are expected.
- Not much is known about how the virus is behaving.
- Given large mutations, it could be more virulent.
- Vaccines and existing treatment may not be so effective.

Again Global economy is uncertain now:

The inequity that has characterized the global response has now come home to roost.

This variant illustrates the existing risk to the global economy from regions or individual Countries that had low Vaccination rates. The global economic recovery remains tethered to the Pandemic. It is too early to quantify the risk to the recovery of economy because it depends on the speed of transmission, its virulence, Hospitalization rates, Mortality rates, effectiveness of Vaccines and anti-viral medicines.

It has proved the deficiencies in the global system to protect people from pandemics.

World needs a new Pact on pandemics to counter them. The accord should be a legally binding treaty. ‘Me first’ approaches that stymie the global solidarity needed to deal with sternly.

Preventive Steps required at National Level: It is wise that we get the immunity levels in the population high if the Omicron variant is more transmissible or protection from the vaccines is reduced. Health authorities should reassure the public on Vaccines.

- Strengthen the Public Health System and social measures.
- Accelerate Vaccination of all particularly high risk/priority groups.
- Rapid and effective screening at international airports. Two RT-PCR Tests of one and all coming from abroad within 96 hours of arrival.
- Allow booster jabs of healthcare workers, frontline workers and people with comorbidities. Start fast Vaccination of Children.
- Early approval of Anti-Viral Vaccines like Pfizer’s Paxlovid and Merck’s Molnupiravir (Oral Antiviral Vaccine).
- Aware people about risks and COVID-appropriate behaviour (CAB).
- Scale up screening and surveillance of patients arriving with travel history.
- COVID clinic, Mass screening and have Hospital Wards on standby.

Treatment: Corticosteroids and IL6 Receptor Blockers appear to be effective.

Vaccines : Indigenous COVID-19 Vaccine Covaxin may provide better protection against Omicron. It is only the inactivated vaccines like Covaxin which have a much broader exposure because they are using the full virus having many antigens. The likelihood of some immune escape from vaccines is there because most of them are directed only against the spike protein. Scientific conjecture says that Covaxin might be more effective.

Approval is being sought from Drug Regulator for Covishield as a booster dose citing adequate stock of Vaccine & demand for booster shot due to emergence of new variants.

Vaccines will likely protect against severe COVID-19 cases from the New Omicron variant as they have against the other variants.

Tab. Molnupiravir (oral pill) can be effective against Omicron and any SARS-CoV-2 variant because they work differently from antibodies and vaccines that attached to the spike protein. It reduces hospitalizations and death by 30% in adults who are at risk of severe disease. It is not recommended for children and pregnant women.

Paxlovid showed better interim results as it reduced the risk of Hospitalization among high risk patients treated within three days of symptom onset by almost 90% and no deaths. Its safety profile is comparable to a placebo with most effects being mild in intensity. Whether Paxlovid can be used as prophylaxis (preventive) is being tested.

The WHO reiterates that Countries should use a “risk-based approach to adjust international travel measures” while agreeing that the rise in Corona Virus cases might lead to higher morbidity and mortality.

WHO has warned that ‘blanket’ travel bans will not prevent the spread of Omicron as it risked doing more harm than good. It warned the ‘blanket’ bans could ultimately dissuade countries from sharing data about the evolving virus. Unvaccinated people vulnerable to Covid-19 including over-60s, should avoid travel to areas with community transmission of the virus. The global response must be “calm, calmposed, coordinated, synchronized and coherent” urging the Nations to take rational, proportional risk reduction measures.

Government Rolls Back Plan to Resume Regular International Flights from 15th Dec., 2021:

Flights under existing bilateral bubble flight arrangement for international connectivity to continue.

The Centre has issued following guidelines for international travellers :

- Travellers need to submit a self-declaration form on Government’s Air Suvidha portal; Upload-ve RT-PCR report (conducted 72hrs prior to travel) and a declaration of authenticity of the report and their travel plans for 14 days and download Aarogya setu app developed by the National Informatics Centre under Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.
- Airlines need to ascertain fulfilment of these conditions.

ON Arrival at Airport: Thermal screening and copy of self-declaration form.

RT-PCR test is mandatory for passengers arriving/transiting from ‘at risk countries’. They will be allowed to leave/transit only after -ve result. 7 days home quarantine even if tested negative; re-negative test on 8th day. Genomic testing, isolation for those testing +ve.

Random 2 % travellers arriving from not at risk countries to be tested; travellers advised self-monitoring at home for 14 days.

Exemption from post-arrival testing only if a person is travelling from not at risk country and has only a transit (without leaving immigration) in at risk country before taking the destination flight. This rule also applies to those arriving at seaports/land ports; self-declaration form is must.

Those < 5 years of age exempted from pre-and post-arrival testing. If symptomatic, testing & treatment as per SOP.

The asymptomatic travellers will also have to undergo RT-PCR test (Gold standard for COVID-19 testing). Travellers can leave the airport only after the RT-PCR test is negative upon arrival. Modified PCR-Testing should be conducted on travellers who are COVID-19 positive amid concerns over the heavily mutated variant - Omicron.

Curbs tightened by Maharashtra for local travel:

7 Days mandatory institutional quarantine for passengers arriving in the state from “at risk” countries; RT-PCR test on 2nd, 4th and 7th day of the arrival for such passengers; if last test is negative and s/he will then have to undergo 7 days home quarantine.

Travellers from other countries will have to undergo a compulsory RT-PCR test on arrival and 14 day home quarantine, even if test result is negative. Travellers testing positive will be referred to a hospital.

All domestic travellers landing have to carry a negative RT-PCR report which should not be older than 72 hours.

However, Maharashtra has been advised to issue orders in line with the Union Government.

Karnataka: Those arriving from abroad to be tested on arrival; 7 days home quarantine is must.

Different Travel Guidelines from Centre and from States confuse Flyers. The Central Government has requested the States not to issue separate guidelines.

Wait and watch policy over the new development. We should be cautious, not worried.

There is urgent need for extreme concern regarding Omicron Variant till more is known.

Ref. : The Economic Times, 30th November, 2021 and 2nd December, 2021.

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