



CORONA VIRUS VARIANT –OMICRON : ‘VARIANT OF CONCERN’ (VoC)

“India is set to defeat COVID-19.
Every Indian is making it possible”
- PM Narendra Modi

The UN Health Agency on 26th November 2021 declared the recently discovered new strain B.1.1.529 of COVID-19 in Southern Africa to be a ‘Variant of Concern’ (VoC) and named it Omicron.

- The heavily mutated Omicron Coronavirus Variant is likely to spread internationally and pose a very high risk of surging infection 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).
- Its emergence has proved that transmissions of the Virus in areas with low vaccination rates would accelerate its evolution.
- The Variant has 50 mutations, 32 relating to the spike protein.
- The large number of mutations on the spike protein can affect the Virus’s ability to spread and infect potentially making it a big threat.
- Omicron appears to be more transmissible than previous Variants, including to already Vaccinated persons or cases with prior infection.

Breakthrough infections by Omicron are usually mild (WHO).

Protection from severe illness is more pronounced among those who received two doses of the Vaccine and/or had a prior infection.

We have better hybrid immunity than other Nations against the heavily mutated Omicron and hence, are better protected because of massive Vaccination drive.

The following robust measures have been undertaken for necessary preparedness, mitigation and awareness generation activities among the public regarding COVID-19 by the Government of India under the dynamic, astute and visionary leadership of our beloved Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Damodardas Modi jee :

- Strengthened the Public Health System and social measures.
- The robustness and agility of the supply chain system of Vaccines and Medicines.
- Vaccination programmes of all particularly high risk/priority groups and Children.
- Rapid and effective screening at International airports.
- Precautionary jabs of healthcare workers, frontline workers and people with Comorbidities/Immunodeficiency, when eligible, to fend off infection as three – shot course of Vaccine is able to neutralize this Variant.
- COVID-Appropriate Behaviour (CAB).
- Increased surveillance, screening/testing, Genome sequencing, isolation and monitoring of patients arriving with travel history.
- COVID Clinic, Mass Screening and having 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 it contains many antigens. The likelihood of some immune escape by the Variants from Vaccines is there because most of them are directed only against the spike protein. Scientific conjecture says that Covaxin might be more effective.

Vaccines will most 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 attach 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 revealed better interim results as it reduced the risk of hospitalization among high risk patients treated within three days of symptom(s) onset by almost 90% and so far no deaths have been reported. Its safety profile is comparable to a placebo with most side 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”. It 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 the 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, composed, coordinated, synchronized and coherent” urging the Nations to take rational, proportional risk reduction measures.**

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 be dealt with sternly.

COVID-19 situation is being continuously reviewed and monitored to ensure that the multi-pronged surveillance, prevention and containment strategy is effectively implemented.

Sd/
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