

COVID-19 UPDATE: New Omicron subvariant XBB.1.5 (also known as "The Kraken") in South Africa

20 January 2023

Dear Member

POLMED would like to update all its members on the latest developments concerning the new COVID-19 Omicron subvariant known as XBB.1.5 or "The Kraken".

The first case of this subvariant was detected in South Africa by the Network for Genomics Surveillance team at Stellenbosch University from a sample collected late in December 2022 ^{(1) (2) (3)}. According to the World Health Organisation, this new subvariant was initially identified in October 2022 and is claimed to be the most transmissible of the COVID-19 variants and subvariants ⁽⁴⁾. It has now been detected in 29 countries and appears to be spreading rapidly ⁽⁵⁾. South African vaccinologist and Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Wits University, Professor Shabir Madhi, has stressed that based on international data, this subvariant is unlikely to cause an increase in severe COVID-19 cases in South Africa ⁽⁶⁾.

During a press conference on 10 January 2023, the Minister of Health, Dr Joe Phaahla, indicated that no new lockdown or travel restrictions would be imposed in South Africa. The country will also not reintroduce compulsory mask-wearing ⁽⁷⁾. Instead, the country will step up COVID-19 testing and continue to monitor wastewater for particles of the COVID-19 virus in response to the discovery of the subvariant ^{(3) (7)}.

The National Health Department will broaden the categories of adults who can receive another booster shot of COVID-19 vaccination. The details of the categories and doses are expected by the end of January 2023. To date, these boosters have been reserved for our adult population above the age of 50 years ^{(8) (9)}. The department has confirmed that the country has sufficient stocks of the Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer vaccine. The Paediatric Pfizer vaccine (for children under 12) is expected in the country by the end of January 2023 ⁽⁷⁾.

The country will continue with the current booster schedule, i.e., people vaccinated with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine can receive a booster shot with a Pfizer vaccine and vice versa ⁽⁷⁾. For children aged between 12 and 17, the department advises that no further booster (after two shots) is recommended as they are at low risk of severe disease ⁽⁷⁾.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE



The Omicron subvariant XBB.1.5 is currently seen as the most transmissible of the COVID-19 variants and subvariants.



It is still unclear if this new COVID-19 variant causes severe symptoms, hospitalisation and death. However, local expertise indicates that it is unlikely to increase severe disease.



The public are strongly advised to receive another booster shot of COVID-19 vaccination if eligible in terms of the national vaccination programme.

Kind regards,
POLMED

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*Please use the latest browser to view the Electronic Vaccination Data System (EVDS).



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