

No cause for concern yet in India: Experts

SANKET KOUL

New Delhi, 18 May

As several Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand saw a surge in Covid-19 cases in the last week, medical experts in India have said that there is no need to panic.

India registered 58 new cases since April 28, taking the total number of active cases to 93, according to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's Covid dashboard. The rise in fresh cases comes at a time when Covid testing volumes are not high at the moment. This is because many patients with viral fever and Covid-like symptoms are not being asked to undergo a test.

"The Centre and state governments are vigilant even though there is no plan to come out with any new guidelines yet. The caseload is relatively low, causing no panic," a source in the health ministry said.

Hong Kong and Singapore saw a relatively new strain of the virus. According to reports, Singapore reported a 28 per cent jump in estimated Covid cases last week, with numbers reaching 14,200 in the first week of May. Hong Kong too saw a rise in respiratory samples testing positive to 13.66 per cent in the week ending May 10 compared to 6.21 per cent four weeks ago. The Sars-CoV-2 variants circulating in Singapore are LF.7 and NB.1.8, both descendants of the JN.1 variant (Omicron).

Sabine Kapasi, advisor, public health and healthcare services, strategist, United Nations Covid-19 Task Force, said India's Covid situation is relatively stable, with a low number of active cases. "States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are testing more due to their higher case loads," she added.

According to data from the Covid-19 dashboard, more than 85 per cent of new cases (46 out of 58) in India have come from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry.

Calling it a normal surge during the viral period, Tushar Tayal, consultant for internal medicine at CK Birla Hospital in Gurugram said new cases of Covid have been infrequent in India, with daily counts remaining low. "Currently only 5 per cent of active Covid cases may require hospitalisation. This is a significant decrease from 20-23 per cent during the second wave of the pandemic in 2021," he added.

Several patients suffering from Covid symptoms have not been prescribed tests, they claim.

"The doctors have asked us not to test for Covid despite me and my family falling sick with viral fever within two days of each other," Chennai resident Sampath (name changed) told *Business Standard*. He added that members of his family are showing symptoms such as extreme body pain



Low caseload

- India registered 58 new Covid-19 cases since April 28
- Doctors call the surge 'normal', say only 5% of new cases need hospitalisation
- Concerns come as Covid cases rise in Hong Kong & Singapore
- Experts say surge in these places caused by new sub variants of JN.1 variant
- While highly infectious, these variants may not cause serious illnesses

and possible brain fog, but doctors see it as a 'new viral fever'. "I have had Covid twice, but the current episode is worse. The only difference this time is that we have no fear and the doctors are also fine with it," he said.

Tayal said that hospitals continue to screen for Covid symptoms. "However, routine mandatory testing before surgeries or procedures has largely been relaxed, except for high-risk patients or specific hospital policies," he added.

Commenting on the new strain, Sandeep Budhiraja, group medical director, Max Healthcare, said the new variants are the sub-variants of JN.1, which dominated the last Covid outbreak in various countries, including the US and India. "We already know how variants belonging to the Omicron family (such as JN.1) work. While highly infectious, they do not cause any serious illness in most people," he said.

Kapasi added that the new strain reportedly has similar symptoms to previous variants, including fever, cough, and fatigue. "Severity varies depending on individual health factors," she said.

Tayal said that apart from respiratory effects, symptoms of the sub-variant include nausea and diarrhea, along with neurological symptoms like brain fog.

To tackle any possible uptick in India, Buddiraja said that where there is suspicion, especially with travellers, testing should be done. If needed, the person should be isolated. "At this stage, any advice for the larger population is not required," he added.

(With inputs from Anjali Singh)