

VIRUS OUTBREAK

Covid-19: S'pore bars visitors from Daegu, Cheongdo

Move comes as authorities announces breakthrough in linking existing clusters through serological testing

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SINGAPORE is turning away with effect from Wednesday night all visitors with travel history to Daegu and Cheongdo in South Korea within the last 14 days, even as authorities announced a breakthrough in linking existing clusters through serological testing in what's believed to be the first such use of the test.

Returning Singapore citizens, permanent residents and long-term pass holders with a travel history to Cheongdo county and Daegu city within the last 14 days will be issued a stay-home notice.

Serological testing, a type of blood test that looks for antibodies, was used on two Singapore suspect cases – 83 and 91 – to determine if they had virus-specific antibodies in their blood, Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) said in a statement on Tuesday.

This is because the standard laboratory test for Covid-19 infections – a molecular test called Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) – will not work on patients who have recovered and whose immune system has cleared the virus, the ministry said.

However, the immune system produces antibodies in response to the infection, and these virus-specific antibodies can stay with the recovered pa-

tient for several years, it added.

Developed by a research team at Duke-NUS Medical School, it is believed to be the first time in the world serological testing is used in contact tracing for Covid-19 patients.

With the assistance of the Singapore Police Force, this has helped MOH link the spate of infections at Grace Assembly of God, the largest coronavirus cluster here, to two existing clusters – a Life Church and Missions service on Jan 19 and a Chinese New Year gathering at Mei Hwan Drive on Jan 25.

This is because Cases 83 and 91 were present at the Life Church and Missions service, which two Wuhan travellers attended on Jan 19, and the

Chinese New Year gathering at Mei Hwan Drive. However, they had recovered from the virus at the time of investigations, which was why serological testing was helpful.

Kenneth Mak, director of medical services at MOH, said the chain of events helped to establish a clear link to travellers from Wuhan.

"This gave us confidence that these cases were not a result of widespread transmission from other sources," Assoc Prof Mak said at a press conference on Tuesday evening.

Gan Kim Yong, Health Minister and co-chair of a multi-ministry task force set up to deal with the coronavirus outbreak, said: "While we have seen

the number of new cases here in Singapore remain low for the last few days, we must be aware that the global situation remains dynamic and we cannot afford to be complacent."

This is especially since there has been a sudden increase in cases in South Korea, Italy and Iran, he noted.

As at 12pm on Tuesday, South Korea has reported 893 confirmed cases, with 501 linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu and 113 from Daenam Hospital in Cheongdo.

The multi-ministry task force has thus decided to ban new short-term travellers from Cheongdo and Daegu, with the restriction kicking in from Feb 26 at 11.59pm. This comes after a

Feb 23 travel advisory for Singaporeans to defer non-essential travel to both places.

Lawrence Wong, National Development Minister and co-chair of the multi-ministry task force, said a more stringent restriction on travellers all of South Korea may be imposed if the virus spreads beyond the two cities.

Returning residents and long-term pass holders will be placed on a 14-day Stay-Home Notice, he added.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) said it will require all work pass holders with such travel history to obtain MOM's permission before returning. Employers are required to apply for entry approval online from 8am on Feb 26, MOM said.