

S'poreans should not let guard down against virus: Experts

As the authorities investigate whether safe distancing rules were breached leading to a family cluster of Covid-19 cases, experts warned that people should not let their guard down against the virus as Singapore continues to reopen.

The country is still not out of the woods at least until a viable vaccine reaches the market, they said.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the Na-

tional University Hospital, said if individuals or groups decide to have their own set of rules, they stand to put the whole community at risk.

He urged the country to stand united, as if case numbers rise, the Government may need to increase restrictions again.

With phase two, which started on June 19, extending beyond two months, it is also important that Singaporeans do not become too

greedy in wanting a quicker pace of easing of restrictions, he noted.

“Nothing has changed, the virus is still there and we are still vulnerable. People should be pleased that our numbers are low and we have good freedoms.”

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said it was natural to have some fatigue about rules like wearing a mask and social distancing, but this was something the country must tackle collectively to avoid a resurgence in the community.

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Recent family cluster shows need to abide by safe practices: Experts

The whole community can be put at risk if individuals let their guard down, they warn

Clara Chong

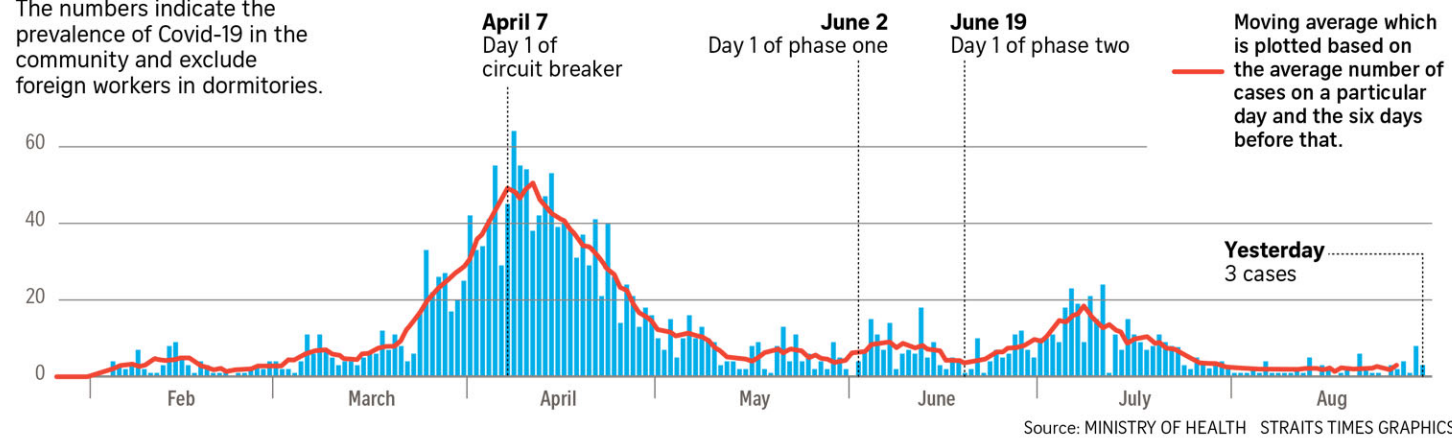
A recent family cluster of five Covid-19 cases from two households is a sign that it is still critical for Singaporeans to continue safe practices, at least until there is a viable vaccine, experts cautioned yesterday.

The Health Ministry said on Sunday it is investigating if there were any breaches in safe distancing rules that led to the family cluster.

Increasingly, Singaporeans have been letting their guard down, and gatherings – such as a birthday celebration of 20 people across four tables held in a restaurant – are not an uncommon sight.

Community cases here

The numbers indicate the prevalence of Covid-19 in the community and exclude foreign workers in dormitories.



But the grim reality is that things can get better slowly and can also get worse very quickly, Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious dis-

eases expert at the National University Hospital, told *The Straits Times*.

“The public needs to have a long-

haul view, and if individuals or groups decide to have their own set of rules, they stand to put the whole community at risk.”

The current practices of having no more than five in a group, wearing masks and keeping a safe distance have served Singapore well

and kept the country safe, and if people believed in these practices previously, they should continue to do so and not allow fatigue to set in, Prof Fisher added.

He said the country needs to remain united against breaches.

“If case numbers rise, the Government may need to increase restrictions and everyone will lose some freedom because of a few.”

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said: “Until we are confident that Singapore will no longer see chains of community infections, individuals, employers and businesses must continue to keep up the safe management measures.”

He said that the recent cluster was particularly worrying, as at least one of the confirmed cases was still active in the community while symptomatic.

All it would take is one unfortunate incident to seed a large cluster and ignite infection chains that lead rapidly to widespread community transmissions. This would need a lot more effort and time to contain, he warned.

As the country experiments with relaxing some border restrictions, there is an even greater need for each individual to keep his guard up and maintain discipline over mask wearing, safe distancing and limiting large gatherings, he stressed.

An uptick of community cases locally could also see other countries making it harder for Singaporeans to travel, Prof Fisher noted.

There are signs that it may not be all smooth sailing ahead if people do not stay vigilant, he said, pointing to the sight of crowded malls.

“It’s important to not build crowds as that setting could see a super-spreading event. There are so many people and safe distancing is not possible. Of course, our numbers remain good, but what makes increasing numbers is the bad behaviour such as crowding and the lack of safe distancing.”

With phase two, which started on June 19, extending beyond two months, it is also important that Singaporeans do not become too greedy in wanting a quicker pace of easing of restrictions, Prof Fisher said. “Nothing has changed, the virus is still there and we are still vulnerable. People should be pleased that our numbers are low and we have good freedoms.”

The relaxation of rules also depends on factors beyond the sheer number of people in a group, said Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

Things like the size of a space, the proximity of people in it, the level of ventilation, and if there will be eating, loud conversation or singing, all play a role in determining the level of risk, he noted.

It is hard to capture every nuance in a general rule, he mused.

“So the tension in increasing the social group size to more than five is the need to second-guess how people will behave once the change comes. People are complicated, much more so than viruses

are,” he noted.

Nonetheless, despite the persistence of community cases, Singapore remains in a good position, Prof Cook said.

“The two most important things that we should avoid exceeding are our intensive care unit capacity, and the capacity of our contact tracing teams. At the current level of transmission, neither is an immediate threat.”

With Covid-19 being a new normal that everyone needs to adapt to, being able to deal with some level of fatigue would be critical, the experts noted.

“The reality is, until we are able to go about our daily lives without having to wear a mask or to worry about safe distancing and SafeEntry, there will always be a degree of fatigue that one will feel, and it is something we must tackle collectively to avoid a resurgence in the community,” Prof Teo said.

One silver lining of the family cluster would be to see it as a test of the overall system, from tracing and testing to isolating contacts.

“If the system kicks in efficiently, we should see perhaps a few more linked cases emerge during the quarantine period, and subsequently the chain terminates,” said Prof Teo.

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