

Singapore on track to further ease restrictions: Experts

Timothy Goh

Experts say the nation should be on track to further ease Covid-19 measures soon, given the current situation and how things have developed over the past three weeks.

They added that while it is still too early to tell the impact of the Omicron variant, there have been some encouraging early signs.

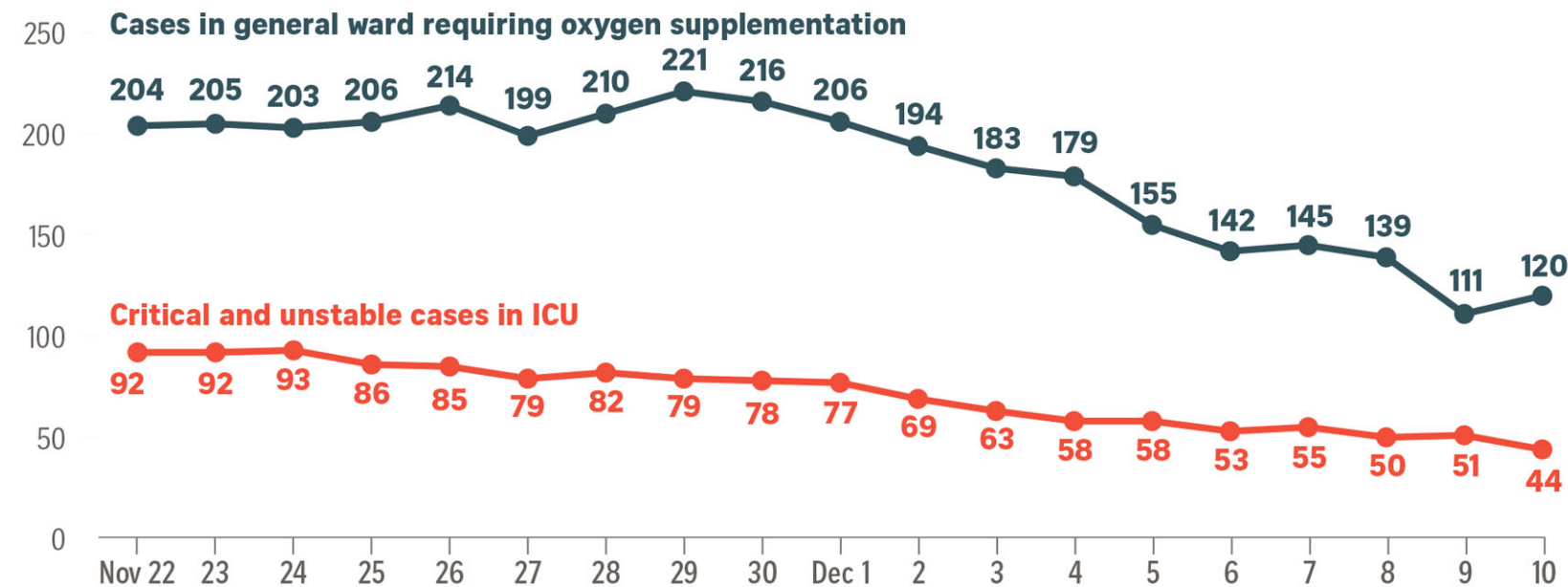
Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, told *The Straits Times* that unless the authorities are waiting to give more people their booster shots or get children vaccinated, there "isn't much else to wait for" in reopening.

"It makes sense to be a little cautious while the Omicron epidemiology is gauged, but I'd be surprised if there isn't further relaxation of measures soon, perhaps come the new year," he said.

A report by the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health last Friday said the characterisation of Omicron is still "very uncertain" and emphasised that there may be significant changes in the understanding of the virus strain over the next few

No spike in serious Covid-19 infections

On Nov 22, Singapore eased some Covid-19 restrictions, including allowing people to gather in groups of up to five. So far, this has not led to an increase in the number of severe cases, nor overwhelmed hospital capacity and resources.



Source: MINISTRY OF HEALTH STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

weeks. But it noted that the variant will likely spread more easily than the original version of the virus.

The multi-ministry task force tackling the coronavirus here had earlier eased measures on Nov 22,

allowing people to gather in groups of up to five. It added then that the country would consider its next steps "around the end of December" if all went well.

Prof Cook noted on Friday that

since the middle of last month, the number of new cases has fallen from around 2,000 or 3,000 a day to fewer than 1,000.

While he acknowledged that the fall had been tapering off recently

and that some of the drop could be due to fewer people getting formally diagnosed, he said the number of patients in intensive care units (ICUs) has also fallen "quite a lot" over the last few weeks.

"This gives some confidence we are rounding the corner," he said.

Professor Paul Tambyah, senior consultant at the National University Hospital's division of infectious diseases, noted that the daily reported numbers do not include those who test positive via antigen rapid tests, which, according to the Ministry of Health's (MOH) guidelines, should be the majority of cases.

But the professor of medicine at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine added: "What is more important is that most of the public hospitals are now apparently able to start reducing the additional beds that they had set aside for patients with severe Covid-19."

In addition, the number of patients in the ICU and the number of patients who need oxygen supplementation have remained relatively stable, said Prof Tambyah.

Prof Cook said that the number of severe cases remains the critical metric people should watch.

"That's what we're trying to avoid - deaths and diversion of the healthcare resources towards severe infections."

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