



MINISTRY OF HEALTH

26th NOVEMBER 2021

PRESS RELEASE ON THE NEW COVID-19 VARIANT

Kenya is currently witnessing a decreased number of confirmed COVID-19 disease with 254,862 cases reported as of 26th November 2021, a total of **5,333** deaths and a case fatality rate of 2.1%.

A new variant of COVID-19 has been detected in Botswana, South Africa and Hong Kong, with the highest number of mutations. This variant, christened B.1.1.529, carries 32 mutations which makes it highly transmissible and with potential for vaccine escape. So far, cases of the new variant are restricted to the three countries, but given its ease of transmission and a global return to mass movements, there is need for increased vigilance at all our points of entry.

Response measures in the affected countries are not very clear yet, with vaccination rates in South Africa being still low at 41%. The United Kingdom has already banned flights from South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini and Zimbabwe, while India has initiated Rapid Diagnostic Testing (RDT) for all passengers arriving from the above-named Southern Africa countries. It is expected that more countries will place the six (6) countries and any other country reporting the variant on specific restrictions including quarantine measures and flight bans.

Risk to Kenya

Kenya enjoys cordial relations with the Republic of South Africa and passenger air traffic between Kenya and South Africa is significant and so the potential of introduction is a real threat. This can however be mitigated by measures taken in South Africa to control transmission rates, exit screening in all affected countries at all points of exit used by passengers from the affected countries and effective entry screening in Kenya. Whilst passenger traffic may not be as significant from Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini and Zimbabwe, enhanced surveillance protocols including quarantine and repeat testing should be applied to all

passengers from all these countries reporting the new variant including Hong Kong, and passengers transiting through the same.

The National Public Health Emergency Operation Centre (PHEOC) is still fully activated to facilitate coordination of response to the pandemic. Stand-by trained Rapid Response Teams at both national, county and sub-County levels who are deployed to investigate and respond to any clustering of cases are on high alert.

Given the nature of transmission of COVID-19, it is inevitable that the variant may eventually get into the country. The country should prepare for an upsurge in number of cases which are likely to be severer amongst unvaccinated persons.

In the interim, the Ministry of Health directs and advises as follows;

1. All national and county health facilities should prepare to handle a potential increase in number of new cases as per recently reviewed COVID-19 case management guidelines. Special emphasis should be placed on availability of critical care facilities, piped oxygen and additional human resource surge capacity.
2. All eligible Kenyans are strongly encouraged to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 given the now abundant supply of the vaccines in the country
3. All Points of Entry (POE) must conduct rigorous screening of all arriving passengers from the affected countries, with physical proof of vaccination prior to entry into the country for all inbound travelers
4. All inbound travelers into Kenya must be in possession of a **NEGATIVE** COVID-19 PCR taken 96 hours before arrival into the country.
5. The established relevant testing and genomic sequencing centers are directed to continue active genomic surveillance to inform on the circulating variants and appropriate mitigation measures.

Finally, we urge all Kenyans whether vaccinated or not to continue adhering to the public health social measures including proper wearing of masks, social distancing, hand washing with soap and water and use of sanitizers.

The Ministry of Health is keenly monitoring the situation and will provide further advisory as more information emerges.

Dr. Patrick Amoth, Ebs
Ag. Director General for Health
26th November, 2021