

13 December 2021

Updated advice from OzSAGE on the Omicron variant

OzSAGE notes with concern the latest Technical Briefing from the UK Health Security Agency, '[SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and variants under investigation in England](#)', published 10 December 2021 and the associated [Risk Assessment](#) published 9 December 2021.

Key points include:

- Studies of households and contacts find a higher risk of transmission to contacts from an Omicron index case, when compared to Delta index cases. The Risk Assessment shows that Omicron has a growth advantage over Delta; whether that is due to immune evasion or transmissibility (or both) remains to be seen. The Agency concludes that Omicron is likely to outcompete Delta in the UK and predominate, with Omicron and Delta cases reaching parity as early as mid-December;
- There is no epidemiologic data as yet to definitively assess the severity of Omicron compared to Delta; and
- Based on neutralisation data from multiple laboratories and preliminary assessment of real world [vaccine effectiveness in the UK](#), Omicron displays a reduction in immune protection against infection with very low protection against symptomatic infection after two doses of both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines. However, third dose boosters appear to confer significant benefit and raise protective antibody levels substantially.

OzSAGE notes that [as of 12 December](#), 19,262,415 Australians were double-vaccinated (75.0% of the population) but only 687,067 (2.7% of the population) had received a third dose.

OzSAGE has interpreted this data to have the following implications for the Australian context:

- Just as the UK is predicting Omicron to dominate over Delta, so it is likely to become the dominant strain of SARS-CoV-2 in Australia in 2022 unless stricter public health measures are immediately introduced;
- Even if Omicron does not cause more severe disease than Delta, its impact on health system capacity may still be overwhelming due to potentially high infection rates and the large proportion of the Australian population that remains unprotected because they have not had a third (booster) dose. The seemingly significant growth advantage of Omicron over Delta (meaning a much larger number of persons are likely to be infected, of which some portion will require hospitalisation) means even a small percentage requiring hospitalisation may stress the health system;
- Given the likely increased disease burden and health system impact, Australia should consider further shortening the minimal interval to third dose boosters, as the UK has done. The third dose could be given any time from 2-6 months after the second dose. There is a significant risk that 5-6 months will be too late to prevent a surge in Omicron

in Australia, given the seemingly very low protection offered by just two doses. Rapidly achieving high third dose coverage is essential for protecting Australians;

- Australia should commence the vaccination of children aged 5-11 years as soon as possible;
- Well-fitted face masks should be mandated inside public buildings, ideally for all persons aged 2 years and older (with appropriate exemptions). The community should be [advised on strategies to improve protection](#) offered by different types of masks and respirators, which [vary in effectiveness](#);
- The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) should redefine “fully vaccinated” for the purpose of entering Australia or attending public spaces, to include a requirement that adults have received a second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine within the past six months or that they have received a third dose booster;
- There should be a communication campaign to change the community perception that being double vaccinated is adequate for protection, and that a third dose is needed for all adults;
- Vaccination rates should be reported consistently with other countries that report percentages for the entire population. This is important for making clear the true extent to which all Australians are protected from COVID-19;
- Front-line health care workers must receive their third dose as a matter of urgency and adequate supplies of fit-tested respirators must be made available for continuous use within health and aged care settings;
- Omicron reinforces the importance of international efforts to roll out vaccinations in Low and Middle Income Countries, including the donation of vaccines by High Income Countries to ensure global vaccine equity; and
- Australia should support international efforts to collaborate in gathering genomic data on emerging variants.

OzSAGE also takes this opportunity to remind of the importance of our previous advice documents, including:

- Reduce the risk of lockdowns during the holiday season- Response to new variant of concern: Omicron (https://ozsage.org/media_releases/reduce-the-risk-of-lockdowns-during-the-holiday-season/)
- Community mask use (<https://ozsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/OzSage-Masks1-4.pdf>)
- Safe Indoor Air (Ventilation) (<https://ozsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Safe-Indoor-Air-advice.pdf>)
- Protecting children from COVID-19 and making schools and childcare safer (<https://ozsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Children-and-schools-V1.2.pdf>)

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