

# Home secretary reviews covid-19 situation in wake of Omicron virus

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Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla on Sunday chaired a meeting where the overall global situation in wake of Omicron virus was reviewed.

The Union Health Secretary has advised States/UTs regarding testing, surveillance, monitoring of hotspots, augmentation of health infrastructure, genome sequencing, and enhancing public awareness, vide his letters dated 25th and 27th of November 2021, the first of which was immediately after the World Health Organization (WHO) flagged the Omicron variant as a Variant of Concern (VoC).

The criticality of scrupulous implementation and rigorous monitoring of the three-pronged surveillance strategy of screening and testing international travellers & their contacts, routine sentinel surveillance and surge surveillance, and timely sending of RT-PCR positive samples to designated INSACOG Genome Sequencing Laboratories (IGSLs) were stressed upon along with enhanced testing and monitoring of covid-19 hotspots, the home secretary said.

The imperative that all international travellers travelling from and transiting through these countries which are part of the "at risk" Country Category of international travellers coming to India and also including all other 'at risk' countries indicated in the revised Guidelines for International Arrivals issued by this Ministry dated 11th November 2021, are subjected to rigorous screening and testing, as per MoHFW Guidelines was suggested. The contacts of these international travellers are also to be closely tracked and tested as per MoHFW guidelines, the government said.

Various preventive measures in place and those to be further strengthened were discussed. The review and updation of Standard Operating Procedure on testing & surveillance of incoming international passengers, especially for those countries identified 'at risk' category was also discussed. The strengthening and intensification of genomic surveillance for variants through the INSACOG network was agreed upon with a focus on sampling and whole genome sequencing of international passengers especially from those countries where Omicron variant has been detected.

Airport Health Officials (APHOs) and Port Health Officials (PHOs) are to be sensitized for strict supervision of testing protocol at airports/ ports.

Decision on effective date of resumption of scheduled commercial international passengers service, to be reviewed, as per evolving global scenario. Closer watch on emerging pandemic situation within the country will be maintained.

As an ongoing effort to strengthen stakeholders for COVID management, the Government has been continuously advising the State/UT governments and various nodal agencies on focused public health responses which are revised based on emerging evidence. A similar risk-based approach is being emphasized with the emergence of the new Omicron variant of covid-19 (B.1.1529) which has been classified as "Variant of Concern" by WHO.

The Prime Minister chaired a high-level meeting to review the emerging situation and India's preparedness in terms of public health measures on Saturday.

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