

## **Amid Omicron worries, Kerala govt urges to exercise caution. Read here**

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Amid concerns over the new Covid variant, the Kerala government on Saturday said a vigil has been sounded in the state in view of the presence of Omicron, a new variant of the coronavirus, reported abroad, but as of now there is no cause for concern in the state.

Health Minister Veena George said the state has taken all precautionary steps as per the guidelines of the Centre and surveillance would be strengthened in all airports. Urging everyone to follow the Covid guidelines strictly, she also said those who have not been vaccinated yet should take the jab at the earliest.

The Health department conducted review meetings and preventive measures have been strengthened based on that. According to the central guidelines, all passengers arriving in the country from abroad should undergo an RT-PCR test within 72 hours and upload it in the concerned portal.

Those coming from the countries mentioned in the central guidelines would be closely monitored, the minister said, adding that such people should take the RT-PCR test again at the state airports. The suspected samples of the passengers coming from these countries would be sent for genetic testing for virus variants, she added.

Meanwhile, an order released by the Kerala government stated that the mandatory RT-PCR test is not essential for children to take part in the ongoing Sabarimala pilgrimage.

As per an order, dated November 26, parents and adults, who are accompanying the little devotees, shall ensure that they carry soaps, sanitizers and mask and adhere to social distancing norms.

It also made it clear that pilgrims and staff, deployed to Sabarimala, shall possess either a two dose vaccination certificate or RT-PCR negative certificate within 72 hours.

"The government is pleased to clarify that children are allowed to go on Sabarimala pilgrimage without RT-PCR test. Parents or adults accompanying the children shall ensure S.M.S. (soap/sanitizer, mask and social distancing) and they are accountable for the children's health issues," the order said.

Despite COVID-19 situation, hundreds of devotees have been trekking the hills to offer prayers at the Ayyappa temple since it opened on November 16 for the two-month-long annual Mandalam-Makaravilakku pilgrimage season. Like the previous year, the devotees are being allowed through a virtual queue system this time also as part of efforts to regulate the flow of pilgrims in view of the pandemic and heavy rains.

(With inputs from agencies)