

Maharashtra-Tope says call on restrictions only after consulting Centre

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The Maharashtra government is closely monitoring the prevailing coronavirus situation and any decision on reimposing restrictions in the state will be taken only after seeking the Centre's guidance and Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's views, Health Minister Rajesh Tope said on Monday amid rising concern over detection of cases linked to the new variant Omicron.

So far, ten cases of the Omicron variant have been detected in the state and 27 swab samples have been sent for genomic testing.

A 37-year-old man who arrived in Mumbai from South Africa and his 36-year-old female friend who landed in the city from the United States have both tested positive for Omicron today.

As per the Maharashtra government, both the patients displayed no symptoms and were vaccinated with Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine.

Until now, five high-risk and 315 low-risk contacts of the patients have been traced. On Sunday, seven cases of Omicron variant were reported in Maharashtra's Pune district, of which six belonged to the same family.

Speaking to reporters, Tope said imposing restrictions on the activities allowed in the state at present will be "too inconvenient" for the people. "It will be too inconvenient for the people if restrictions are imposed on the activities currently allowed.

Hence, we will keep a tab on the situation and take a call (on curbs) following the guidance of the Centre and the (state COVID-19) task force and based on the views of the chief minister," he said.

Tope said schools which have not reopened yet should start in-person classes and pitched for observing Covid-19-appropriate behaviour in daily life.

The minister said the state government is focusing on vaccinating people while facing the situation caused by Omicron, a new coronavirus variant which is causing worries all over the world.

"Rallies, marriages and political meetings are being held on a big scale. If Covid-19-appropriate behaviour is not observed there properly, then it leads to the possibility of spread of the infection.

"And Omicron can spread fast and hence, I think it is the need of the hour to implement the rules strictly," he added.

Tope said in view of the rising cases of Omicron, two more laboratories for genome sequencing will be set up at Aurangabad and Nagpur in addition to the three existing facilities.

The three laboratories in the state are currently burdened with the task of testing swab samples to detect the new variant, he said.

"We have asked the Union Health Ministry to sanction two more labs - at Aurangabad and Nagpur - to ease the burden of testing samples of Omicron," the minister said.

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Genomic sequencing is a process to decode genes in SARS-CoV-2, which causes Covid-19, to help scientists find which variant might be present in swab samples.

Tope informed that the health department is conducting screening of travelers at airports and tracing and testing all those who have returned from overseas in the recent days.

He said the Maharashtra government has again told the Centre to start vaccination of children against Covid-19 and administer booster doses to elderly people.

Asked whether the Maharashtra government would make vaccination against Covid-19 mandatory for eligible people, Tope said, "We believe in counselling and persuading people to get vaccinated... it can not be made mandatory."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified Omicron, detected in South Africa and some other countries recently, as a 'Variant of Concern'.

Health experts have expressed possibilities that owing to the genetic modification in the virus, it may possess some specific characteristics.