

WHO releases new guidelines on contact tracing, quarantine amid Omicron spread

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) on Thursday recommended new guidelines for testing and quarantine of patients in view of the high levels of circulation of SARS-CoV-2, particularly the Omicron variant.

The health body said that quarantine duration for people exposed to the coronavirus can now be shortened, saying those who test negative can now end quarantine after seven days instead of 14 previously.

Where testing to shorten quarantine is not possible, quarantine may be ended after day 10 without testing if the contact presents no symptoms, the agency said in its new interim guidance.

It informed that the post-quarantine transmission risk for 10 days of quarantine (based on pre-Omicron data) is estimated to be around 1%, with an upper limit of about 10%.

It also stated that recently vaccinated contacts of patients can be considered as a lower priority.

But beyond approximately 90 days of vaccination, due to waning protection against infection after the primary series and limited follow-up data for booster doses, the contacts should be considered the same as unvaccinated contacts.

For Covid-19 patients, it said that countries may consider shortening the quarantine period to seven days with the addition of a PCR or Ag-RDT administered by qualified personnel. "WHO does not at this time recommend self-administered tests to shorten quarantine."

Global Covid situation

This comes as the WHO stated on Wednesday that the number of new coronavirus cases globally fell by 19% in the last week while the number of deaths remained stable.

The UN health agency, in its weekly report on the pandemic, pointed out that just over 16 million new Covid-19 infections and about 75,000 deaths were reported worldwide last week.

The Western Pacific was the only region to report a rise in new weekly cases, an increase of about 19%, while Southeast Asia reported a decrease of about 37%, the biggest drop globally. The number of deaths rose by 38% in the Middle East and by about one-third in the Western Pacific.

The biggest number of new Covid-19 cases was seen in Russia. Cases there and elsewhere in Eastern Europe doubled in recent weeks, driven by a surge of the hugely infectious omicron variant.

WHO said that all other coronavirus variants, including Alpha, Beta and Delta, continue to decline globally as Omicron crowds them out.

Among the more than 4,00,000 coronavirus sequences uploaded to the world's biggest virus database in the last week, more than 98% were Omicron.

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The health body also said the BA.2 version of Omicron appears to be “steadily increasing” and its prevalence has risen in South Africa, Denmark, the UK and other countries.

Health officials have noted, however, that Omicron causes milder disease than previous Covid-19 variants and in countries with high vaccination rates, hospitalisation and death rates have not increased substantially, even with Omicron's spread.