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STATEMENT

New COVID-19 variants lead to increase in cases

We are seeing an increase in COVID-19 case numbers in Australia, reflecting community transmission of the Omicron variant XBB.

We are also closely monitoring the overseas transmission of a second Omicron variant – B.Q.1.

While evidence is still emerging, the experience to date with these two variants overseas is that they do not appear to pose a greater risk of severe illness and death – and that the COVID-19 vaccines provide good protection against these outcomes.

All indications are that this is the start of a new COVID-19 wave in Australia. This was to be expected and will part of living with COVID-19 into the future.

The overseas experience is that these new variants have driven increases in case numbers– and hospitalisations at a rate proportionate to this increase – because of their ability to evade the immunity provided by prior infection and vaccination.

It's therefore timely to focus on the actions we can all take to reduce the threat of these new variants, keep the pressure off our health care workers and hospitals and continue to look forward to our summer plans.

There are three things everyone can do to reduce the threat of these variants across our communities – and help limit the size of the wave.

Firstly, make sure you are up to date with your vaccinations – including having a third or fourth dose if you haven't had them already. Make an appointment for this dose as soon as possible so your immunity is boosted for the coming months when we are most likely to see an increase in COVID-19 transmission in Australia.

Vaccination is your best protection against getting severely ill or dying from COVID-19. And evidence from overseas indicates vaccination reduces the prevalence of symptoms associated with long COVID-19.

Secondly, keep a mask handy when away from home. If you're at indoor public places or in crowded settings, a mask can help protect you and reduce the chance of infecting others. It's a simple,

sensible way to add another layer of protection and contribute to our collective effort to slow the spread of the virus.

And thirdly, if you have tested positive or are not feeling well, stay at home until the symptoms have passed. If you do have to leave your house, wear a mask and avoid going to any high-risk settings, including hospitals, aged and disability care facilities.

Through these three measures, you can make a significant contribution to protecting yourself, your family and friends, and the wider community against these new COVID-19 variants.

Advice about managing COVID-19 symptoms is available 24/7 from the Australian Government's National Coronavirus Help Line: 1800 020 080. Information about managing COVID-19 is also available at healthdirect.gov.au.

In addition, people at risk of more severe illness from COVID-19 should talk to their GP now about their eligibility for oral antiviral treatments should they contract COVID-19.

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