

Covid-19: 16 umrah clusters so far, 13 with Omicron

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The Health Ministry has detected 16 Covid-19 clusters so far involving pilgrims returning from umrah pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia, up from nine clusters as of Dec 30.

In addition, seven of these clusters involve index cases that are confirmed to be infected with the Omicron variant through whole-genome sequencing (WGS).

Another six clusters involved presumptive Omicron variant cases still pending confirmation through WGS.

This is an increase from five confirmed and one presumptive Omicron cluster two weeks ago.

The Health Ministry previously said nearly all presumptive Omicron cases were later confirmed to involve the highly transmissible variant.

Meanwhile, the number of non-Omicron clusters involving umrah pilgrims remains unchanged at three.

The 16 clusters are in Pahang (4), Kelantan (3), Kedah (3), Johor (2), Sabah (1), and Labuan (1).

Two more clusters have crossed state lines: Pahang and Johor (1), as well as Kedah, Selangor, and Penang (1).

“The rising number of cases from umrah pilgrim clusters is serious and concerning because it occurred over a short time span, and the disease has spread rapidly from imported cases to family members.

“The cause of the spread of these clusters are due to activities during umrah that breach standard operating procedures (SOPs) including lack of physical distancing, lack of a mask mandate, and the involvement of umrah pilgrims from all over the world.

“In addition, during home quarantine after umrah pilgrimage, there are some activities that breach SOPs such as visitations, meeting pilgrims or family members who just returned from the Holy Land, and so on,” said Health Ministry director-general Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah today.

He said the largest of these clusters is the Keratong 5 Saudi cluster, which involves two imported Omicron cases in Rompin, Pahang, and 34 family members in the state as well as in Johor.

As many as 81.8 percent of close contacts in this cluster have tested positive for the disease.

Overall, a total of 456 people have been screened during contact tracing of umrah clusters, of which 219 tested positive. This corresponds to a positivity rate of 48 percent.

So far, no deaths have been reported and none of the 219 cases require treatment in intensive care units. There is no mention in Noor Hisham's statement whether anyone required hospitalisation.

The government has suspended umrah pilgrimages beginning Jan 8 and no longer allows home quarantine for those returning from umrah.

In a related development, Noor Hisham said the ministry's genomic sequencing efforts from Jan 3 to Jan 10 have detected 99 Covid-19 variants of concern.

Of these, 91.9 percent were identified as the Delta variant while the remainder

are the Omicron variant.

The eight newly confirmed Omicron cases comprise five umrah pilgrims returning from Saudi Arabia, one traveller arriving from Turkey, and two locally acquired infections in Sarawak.

For comparison, the Health Ministry sequenced 172 Covid-19 samples from Dec 26 last year to Jan 2 this year. Of those, 98.8 percent were identified as the Delta variant, while the remainder were Omicron variant cases.

It should be noted that Malaysia only sequences a tiny portion of its Covid-19 cases, which limits its ability to track variants circulating in the country.

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