

ENDEMIC. It's a word we are beginning to understand and accept as more sectors in Malaysia reopen for business, and social and travel restrictions are gradually lifted.

Covid-19 is here to stay and we have to get used to managing our lives while having the virus in our midst. It's time to resume life, albeit in a different, safer manner with new norms.

When Covid-19 becomes an endemic disease, it means the infection will not go away and will continue to be transmitted, says Professor Datuk Dr Lokman Hakim Sulaiman, pro-vice-chancellor of research and director of the Institute for Research, Development and Innovation (IRDI) at the International Medical University (IMU).

Transitioning from a pandemic to endemic stage is about the community seeing a growing number of people who are immune to the virus, either through surviving natural infection or through vaccination, he explains.

As fewer people are susceptible to infection, the number of cases will not be as high as before.

Dr Lokman says effective vaccines will be an important tool as the level of immunity in the population is very important to shift from the pandemic to endemic phase.

Data from around the world has shown

Living with Covid-19

As we enter into the endemic stage, public behaviour and attitudes will determine future challenges, writes **Meera Murugesan**



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that Covid-19 vaccines have successfully brought down serious cases and this will help drive us towards an endemic state faster. However, vaccination rates are not the only indicator of endemicity.

Being in an endemic phase means that

infection is at a level that is "acceptable or manageable", a level which does not constitute a major public health problem, meaning smaller numbers of infections, fewer hospitalisations and deaths.

Infectious diseases consultant and IMU's head of the division of medicine, school of medicine, Professor Dr James Koh Kwee Choy, concurs with Dr Lokman.

Dr Koh says judging from the reported number of Covid-19 positive cases in Malaysia and around the world, bringing infections down to zero is near impossible.

"We are all battle weary since the pandemic started. Covid-19 may never go away but we can live with it, turning it into something less threatening."

The impressive vaccination rate in Malaysia, he adds, is key in reducing the risk of infection and transmission.

However, social responsibility such as practising good hygiene and staying away from crowds when one is unwell is critical too.

RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS

Another aspect is minimising the spread of transmission if you've come in contact with someone who is positive. To do this, self-testing and home isolation are two important strategies.

Dr Koh says today, people can get themselves tested readily by using fast and easy tests. If positive, they can then confirm it with a more accurate testing method and isolate themselves to recover at home, stopping the spread there and then.

Recovery at home is possible because with vaccination, symptoms are mostly mild. This will, at least, give our healthcare system some breathing space so that more serious cases can get the attention they need.

Dr Lokman says how Malaysians conduct themselves during this endemic phase will determine whether infections spread or are kept in check.

He stresses that people should not be complacent and assume hitting the endemic stage means we have won the race.

"Just as we can move from pandemic to endemic, we can as easily make a U-turn back into epidemic or pandemic status."

New variants can push infections and cases back up. The Delta variant, for example, has caused a resurgence of cases in some countries and newer variants of concern, such as the Lambda and Mu, are being closely monitored by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Dr Lokman says in an endemic state, what we are looking at is public responsibility to help manage the disease.

The public must continue to be aware of the importance of risk assessment and management so that they will take appropriate action to minimise the risk of being infected and infecting others.

As nationwide lockdowns are phased out, other measures will need to be pushed forward, such as strengthening the healthcare system to adequately deal with the continuous threat of infection.

Public health measures will still need to be continued. Masking, physical distancing, crowd control and improvement in ventilation must continue to be implemented in areas where transmission is still active.

"Yes, life needs to go on and an endemic state will help us do that, but until such a time when we understand this infection better, we cannot let our guard down."

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Masking and physical distancing will still be necessary in the endemic phase, especially in areas where transmission is still active. PICTURE

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TEST, TEST, TEST

FREQUENT testing is going to become part and parcel of the endemic stage if we want to prevent or reduce transmissions, especially as people go back to work and social activities, and since the vaccinated may still get infected and pass on the virus.

International Medical University head of the division of medicine, school of medicine Professor Dr James Koh Kwee Choy says the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test is generally recommended for those who manifest symptoms or those who have come in close contact with a Covid-19 positive patient.

RTK home test kits may be a cheaper alternative for those who are concerned with their infection status, but exhibit no symptoms of Covid-19. It takes less than 20 minutes for results to become available.

However, if the RTK self-test shows a positive result, it is best to confirm it with a PCR test.