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COVID-19 Omicron Variant – Advisory Update 2

15 December 2021



Purpose

This is Aspen Medical's second update for clients and stakeholders about the Omicron SARS-CoV-2 Variant of Concern, focused on the Australian context.

Current Context for COVID-19

Covid waves

Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra have recently experienced COVID waves. As daily case numbers reduced after the wave peaks and vaccination rates reached high levels, lockdowns were ended in mid-November. Since then, daily new case numbers remained steady around 1200 in Melbourne and 250 in Sydney, until new cases began to rise again in Sydney from early December to 804 cases on 14 December. New waves are expected to take off after reopening in the remaining states, with community transmission of Omicron in NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

Vaccination progress

On 13/12/2021, 75% of all people in Australia were fully vaccinated against COVID-19, ranking as the 24th most vaccinated country in the world behind Singapore (87%), South Korea (81%), Japan (78%) and Malaysia (78%) and just ahead of China (75%), New Zealand (73%) and United Kingdom (69%), and well ahead of Indonesia (37%) (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations¹>). Vaccination of 12–15 year olds is well underway, and for 5–11 year olds, commences on 10/01/2021. For people 18 and over, booster shots are now available five months after their initial course of vaccination. A third dose is necessary to

¹ Accessed 14/12/2021 rounded to whole percentage points

provide maximum immunity against COVID. Currently, less than 3% of the population has received a third dose.

Travel

Based on this high vaccination rate, Australia is in the process of reopening travel between states and territories and to and from overseas. Aspen Medical has previously published a checklist for Australia as it reopens (Aspen Medical Runway to Reopening: the 10-point checklist, 15 September 2021) that aims to maximise economic opportunity whilst minimising avoidable risk.

Within Australia, travel is largely open between ACT, NSW, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland (from 13/12/2021) and Tasmania (from 15/12/2021). Travel to Western Australia commences after the school holidays on 05/02/2022. There remain some restrictions on people who are not fully vaccinated, some requirements to register prior to travel and, in some cases, undertake pre- and post-travel tests (for Queensland). Restrictions are subject to continual change and should be checked before travelling.

Caps on international arrivals remain tight and subject to 14-day government-controlled quarantine, with some exceptions. There are various vaccination and testing requirements before travel. Arrivals into Sydney and Melbourne are above the cap and subject to three-day self-isolation and travellers are required to get a PCR COVID test within 24 hours and on day six after arrival. Travel bubbles, also above the cap, are in place with New Zealand and Singapore, and with Japan and South Korea from 15/12/2021. Specific arrangements for travel within the bubbles should be checked before travel. The Omicron-related 14-day ban on travel to Australia from southern Africa has now been lifted.

Impact of the Omicron variant

The National Cabinet met on 10/12/21 and discussed, among other national issues, Australia's response to COVID-19 and the new Omicron strain (<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-statement-59>).

Omicron impact on COVID epidemiology

While the vast majority of COVID infections outside of Africa are currently due to the Delta variant, the Omicron variant is now causing a growing share of new infections. This trend is likely to be a major feature of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022 with Omicron becoming commonplace, including in Australia during the 'reopening wave' (January–March 2022).

Omicron and COVID severity

Emerging evidence indicates that Omicron infections may be less serious than Delta infections in terms of the proportion of cases requiring hospitalisation (<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/omicron-variant-doesn-t-seem-to-cause-more-severe-disease-top-who-official-says/fd2a43e8-c985-4859-8501-d3253860dc1d>).

Further, the Health Minister Mr Hunt advised on 13/12/2021 that 'all our vaccines provide strong, clear protection against serious illness, hospitalisation and loss of life' from the Omicron variant. Epidemiologic data comparing vaccine effectiveness against severe illness and death for Omicron and Delta are pending.

Australian Government extends some travel restrictions including cruise ships

The Commonwealth has extended the emergency orders for the following for two months until 17/02/2021 covering the mandatory pre-departure testing and mask wearing for international flights, restrictions on international travel from high-risk countries, restrictions on outbound international travel for unvaccinated Australians, and restrictions on the entry of cruise vessels within Australian territory. The order on cruising will be reviewed monthly (<https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/human-biosecurity-period-extended>).

International students and economic visa holders

International students and economic visa holders (including business and seasonal workers) have begun arriving in Australia and we expect that numbers will continue to grow.

Corporate responses

Previous advice

Aspen Medical stands by its advice in our previous update on the Omicron variant (Aspen Medical COVID-19 Omicron Variant – Advisory Update 1, 29 November 2021). This advice includes not being alarmist; maintaining infection prevention and control, including good ventilation and use of masks; have strong COVID-safe management plans; ensure business continuity and risk management plans will be workable if there is an outbreak involving the company; and use self-administered rapid antigen testing in appropriate circumstances.

Masks and sanitiser

In addition to complying with public health directions about masks, companies should strongly encourage masks be worn, especially in high-traffic indoor places. Hand sanitiser should continue to be provided and its use encouraged at entrances, congregating places and high-touch points (e.g. printers, office kitchens).

Hybrid work and on-line meetings here to stay

The emergence of Omicron is likely to slow the return to office work, and emphasise the value of hybrid work from home/work at office. Such approaches will keep the workplace area to staff ratios lower and reduce staff anxiety.

Travel

Staff interstate and overseas travel presents several risks, including catching COVID-19, directions to isolate and test, and changed travel restrictions after departure. Companies should keep their travel policies under review to ensure appropriate case-by-case decision-making that balances value from the travel with the associated risks.

Company executives should be particularly cautious in their assessment of value of travel versus risks to themselves. This should include local travel to high-risk settings and events, and should take particular note of personal hygiene measures while there.

Summary of key insights and actions

- Infection numbers set to increase across the country
- Hybrid work, where appropriate, encouraged
- Travel benefits need to be consciously balanced against the risks
- COVID-19 management and business continuity plans need to be monitored and amended as necessary
- Indoor air quality to be improved with increased ventilation and lower staff ratio to area
- Renewed vigor with public health measures, including mask wearing, hand hygiene and physical distancing
- Workplaces to encourage eligible people to get boosters as they provide added protection against serious illness and transmission.
- Rapid antigen testing by employees may be appropriate in some circumstances

Aspen Medical is able to assist your company with detailed advice about COVID-19 control policies and implementation upon request.

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