

Coronavirus Singapore begins vaccinations

Get vaccine, even if there are few local cases: Gan Kim Yong

Having a population that is widely inoculated will guard against new waves of infection

Yuen Sin

Singaporeans should protect themselves from Covid-19 by getting vaccinated, even if the number of community cases is low, as the next outbreak could be "just one infection away", said Health Minister Gan Kim Yong yesterday.

Urging citizens not to be complacent that the virus is not widely circulating and to take the vaccine when it becomes available to them, he said: "We must always be

prepared that there will be new waves of infection."

Having a population that is extensively inoculated would help the country guard against new waves of infections, Mr Gan said.

"(It will also) allow us to continue to progress towards returning to normalcy in our community and our economy," he said.

At the same time, it would pave the way for Singapore to reopen its travel routes.

"International travel has almost ground to a halt because of... border controls and with vaccination,

it will allow many of these travel routes to be reconnected, and to allow Singapore to be reconnected back to the rest of the world," noted Mr Gan, who co-chairs the multi-ministry task force tackling Covid-19.

He was speaking to reporters at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, where Singapore's Covid-19 vaccination exercise kicked off, with the first Pfizer-BioNTech jabs administered to healthcare workers there. Other healthcare workers will be vaccinated in the coming weeks.

Asked about concerns over the safety of the vaccine, Mr Gan said it has met the requirements of the World Health Organisation, the Health Sciences Authority and other regulatory agencies.

He acknowledged that the long-term effects of the vaccine remain unknown, given that the vaccine has been available only for a few months.

"We are continuing to observe and continue to monitor the data that is emerging... there are precautions that are put in place, and the vaccines have met all the safety

and efficacy requirements for it to be deployed," he added.

Any potential risk of receiving the vaccine also has to be weighed against the potential of a person getting Covid-19 and falling severely ill, he said, noting that Singapore has multiple lines of defence against the virus. This includes an aggressive testing strategy as well as extensive contact tracing procedures.

"Vaccination alone will not allow you to just simply open up and forget about all the other safe distancing measures," he said.

"(When) the whole of Singapore

is vaccinated (and) you have a significant protection against infection, we'll be able to open up significantly after that."

Mr Gan added that members of the Cabinet, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and himself, will also get vaccinated.

The schedules for that are currently being worked out, with priority going to healthcare workers, he said. "When my turn comes, I will similarly be among the first to step forward."

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Health Minister Gan Kim Yong urged Singaporeans not to be complacent that the virus is not widely circulating and to take the vaccine when it becomes available to them. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

REOPENING BORDERS

It also depends on... safe management measures in the destination countries, and whether or not there (are) sufficient safeguards... Vaccination alone will not allow you to just simply open up and forget about all the other safe distancing measures... (When) the whole of Singapore is vaccinated (and) you have a significant protection against infection, we'll be able to open up significantly after that.

HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG, when asked if travel restrictions to countries like Malaysia could be relaxed for residents who have been vaccinated.

Vaccination will be done slowly and carefully to ensure safety: Health Minister

Rei Kurohi

The process of vaccinating Singaporeans against Covid-19 will take some time as it is challenging and must be carried out safely and carefully, said Health Minister Gan Kim Yong.

During a visit to the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) yesterday, Mr Gan said he had met the centre's management team to get a better understanding of the challenges they face and how the vaccination exercise can be carried out smoothly.

Healthcare workers at NCID were among the first Singaporeans to receive the Covid-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech yesterday morning.

This came just over a week after the first batch of the vaccines arrived here from Brussels, Belgium, on Monday last week.

Asked why it took a week before the first jabs were administered, Mr Gan said the process of preparing the vaccine and ensuring the right people receive it has been challenging.

He noted that the vaccine must be administered within a short time once it is removed from low-temperature storage.

The vaccine can be stored at minus 70 deg C for up to six months or at 2 to 8 deg C - the temperature of a common refrigerator - for about



Senior staff nurse Kho Wei Lian, 26, preparing a Covid-19 vaccination jab yesterday at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, where healthcare staff were among the first Singaporeans to receive the Covid-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

five days.

"All the processes have to be smoothened and also we need to make sure that there's no mistakes," stressed the minister.

"For example, the person who is receiving the vaccination, the identity has to be verified, whether he has a pre-existing condition, whether he has allergy. All this has

to be taken into consideration."

Yesterday, 40 NCID staff members, including clinical, nursing, allied health, ancillary and administration staff, were vaccinated. They

will be given a second dose on Jan 20 and the remaining NCID staff will get their jabs progressively.

The National Healthcare Group management and staff will be vaccinated from next month.

Other healthcare workers on the front line are also being rostered for vaccination, with public healthcare institutions and private hospitals arranging for their staff to be vaccinated at their respective premises.

For the general public, Singapore residents aged 70 and older will receive their jabs from February, followed by other Singaporeans and long-term residents who are medically eligible.

Mr Gan noted that during the administration of the first rounds of the vaccine at NCID yesterday, the healthcare workers involved were very cautious and would "check and double-check to make sure that they follow the procedures carefully."

He added that it is better to do it carefully instead of rushing to roll out the vaccine en masse, only to discover unforeseen difficulties and challenges.

"We advise the team to do it carefully, do it slowly. Make sure you smoothen the process and are familiar with the process before you roll out in a big volume. I think doing it this way is safer," said Mr Gan.

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National Centre for Infectious Diseases staff waiting in line to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine yesterday. Each vaccination process took around three minutes and patients were monitored for 30 minutes afterwards to ensure that they tolerated it well. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM



SCAN TO WATCH NCID staff first to receive Covid-19 vaccination

https://str.sg/vaccine31

40 NCID staff first in Singapore to get Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine

Clara Chong

Dr Kalisvar Marimuthu has been priming his loved ones over the last three months for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Singapore's first and only approved Covid-19 vaccine.

And yesterday, his anticipation of the momentous event came to fruition when the 43-year-old senior consultant at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) rolled up his sleeve as the second Singaporean to receive the jab, at NCID's Day Treatment Centre.

"I'm feeling good and lucky... feeling a bit emotional because the vac-

cine is potentially a game changer," Dr Kalisvar, who manages suspected and confirmed Covid-19 cases, told reporters after his injection.

"It has been a long journey for us to reach here, it has been tough for all of us... Vaccines have brought pandemics to their knees in the past," he said, adding that he hoped history would repeat itself.

The nation kick-started its national Covid-19 vaccination programme with 40 staff from NCID getting the jab by the end of yesterday, including Professor Leo Yee Sin, the centre's executive director.

Each vaccination process took around three minutes and patients were monitored for 30 minutes af-

EMOTIONAL MOMENT

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DR KALISVAR MARIMUTHU, a senior consultant at NCID who manages suspected and confirmed Covid-19 cases.

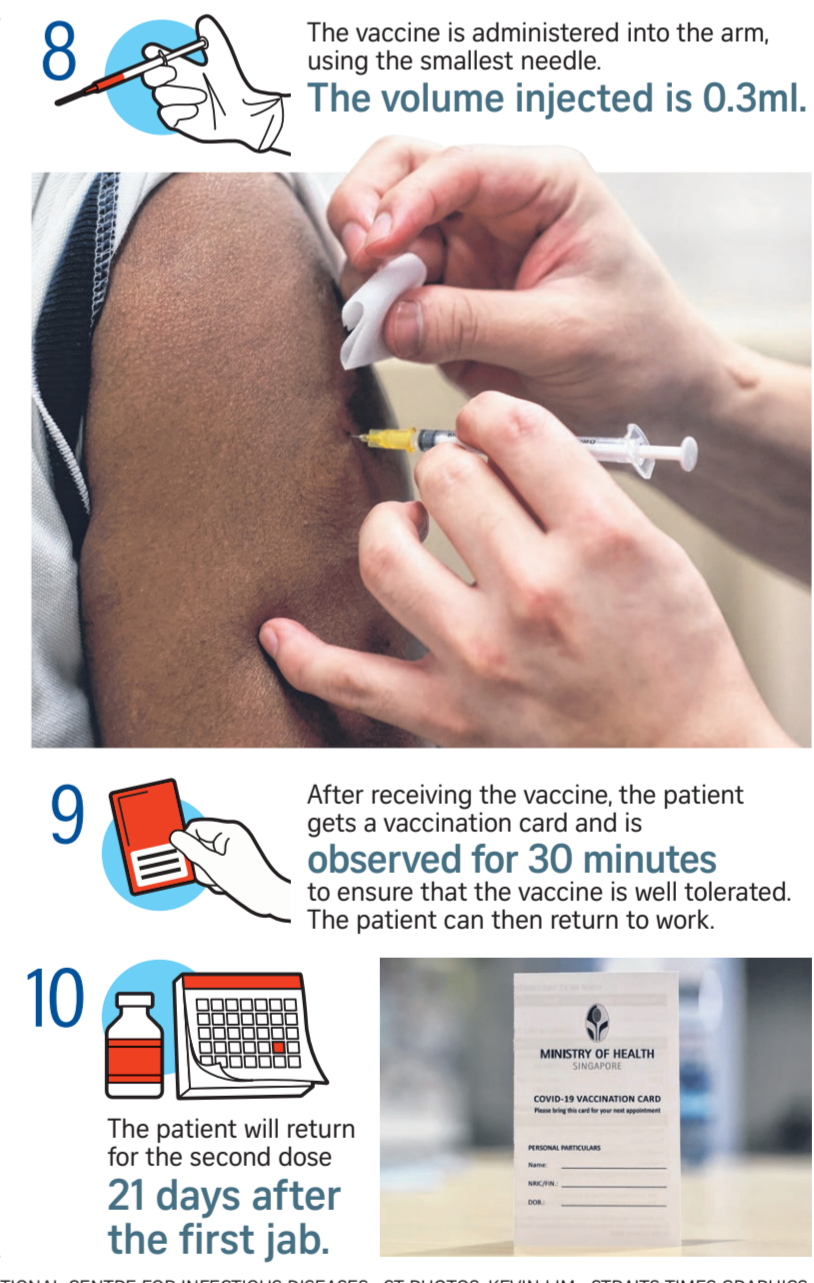


Dr Kalisvar Marimuthu, a senior consultant at NCID, was the second Singaporean to receive the jab yesterday. Dr Kalisvar, who read the regulatory reports and attended the town halls at hospitals on the vaccine, is confident of the product.

A shot in the arm

- The patient fills up an information sheet and screening form before getting vaccinated. Personal particulars, medical information and consent are obtained.
- When it's time for vaccination, the patient is asked about pregnancy status, history of severe allergies and the health of her immune system - such as recently receiving a transplant or cancer treatment.
- If the patient is eligible, the deep-frozen vaccine is thawed and diluted. It can then be kept at room temperature for a few hours. Each Pfizer-BioNTech vial contains five doses of vaccine.
- The vaccinator draws out a sodium chloride solution to dilute the vaccine.
- The vaccine vial stopper is cleaned with a single-use antiseptic swab, before the sodium chloride solution is added.
- The vial is then inverted gently, and the vaccine becomes an off-white suspension.
- The date and time of dilution are recorded. The vaccine vial, once opened, must be discarded after six hours.
- The vaccine is administered into the arm, using the smallest needle. The volume injected is 0.3ml.
- After receiving the vaccine, the patient gets a vaccination card and is observed for 30 minutes to ensure that the vaccine is well tolerated. The patient can then return to work.
- The patient will return for the second dose 21 days after the first jab.

Singapore kick-started its Covid-19 vaccination programme yesterday morning, with 40 front-line workers from the National Centre for Infectious Diseases taking the lead. Clara Chong looks at the steps involved for those getting the vaccine.



Sources: MINISTRY OF HEALTH, NATIONAL CENTRE FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASES. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM. STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



NCID senior staff nurse Mohamed Firdaus Mohamed Salleh getting his Covid-19 vaccination jab yesterday. He works in the intensive care unit looking after Covid-19 patients.

terwards to ensure that they tolerated it well.

The remaining NCID staff will be progressively vaccinated, with the rest of the National Healthcare Group management and staff from next month.

Dr Kalisvar, who read the regulatory reports and attended the town halls at hospitals on the vaccine, is confident of the product, about which he said patients had many questions.

"I think it is only reasonable that they feel concerned," he said. "Because it is such an important vaccine, even small problems may be highlighted a lot in the news."

"As a doctor, it is my job to alleviate some of these concerns that patients have. And these are real concerns."

Transient effects of the vaccination can be alleviated, he said, for instance by taking a Panadol for any pain that might follow the jab.

In fact, pain is something which people should feel as it shows that the body is reacting to the vac-

cine, he added.

Dr Kalisvar also addressed concerns about reported anaphylaxis reaction to the vaccines.

"It's so rare and I know that anaphylaxis is easily treatable with an injection. I know they're going to monitor me after the vaccination, because usually anaphylaxis happens immediately after the vaccination," he added.

First to get the jab was NCID senior staff nurse Sarah Lim, 46, whose job is to screen suspected Covid-19 cases. She said the injection was like an ant bite.

"I am feeling fine..." she told reporters. "I feel grateful and thankful for being the first to be vaccinated. I would encourage (others) to go for it."

She added in Mandarin: "I wanted to take the injection to protect myself, my loved ones, (my) patients and the public."

The injection was given at 9.24am by senior staff nurse Kho Wei Lian, 26. It was removed from the fridge at NCID at 8.30am - ac-

ording to a note on the wall - and delivered about 45 minutes later.

The vaccine needs to be at room temperature for 30 minutes before it is diluted. Only a small volume, or just 0.3ml, is injected. The vaccine vial, once opened, must be used within six hours.

Third in line to get vaccinated was senior staff nurse Mohamed Firdaus Mohamed Salleh, 38.

The vaccine will give him confidence when he carries out his duties, said Mr Firdaus who works in the intensive care unit looking after Covid-19 patients.

"This also gives me the assurance that I can go home safely to my kids," said the father of four.

He did not experience any side effects, and commended the efficient and smooth workflow.

The vaccine requires two injections, given 21 days apart. Those who got their shots yesterday will return for a second dose on Jan 20.

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