

# Moderna booster better protects older people against virus: Study

People over 60 who took the shot had higher antibody levels than those who had Pfizer jab

Ng Wei Kai

A booster shot with the Moderna vaccine offered older people better protection against Covid-19 if they had previously taken Pfizer jabs, researchers at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) have found.

Seven days after taking a booster shot, people above the age of 60 who took Moderna had an average antibody level that was twice as high as those who took the Pfizer-BioNTech/Comirnaty vaccine, the

study showed. This was consistent across all variants of concern of the Covid-19 virus, said NCID in a press release yesterday.

Dr Barnaby Young, head of the Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network in NCID, said the aim of the study is to build local data on understanding immunity towards the disease through booster shots.

"The emergence of variants capable of evading protective immunity remains a concern and highlights the need for a long-term Covid-19 immunisation strategy," he added.



Seniors receiving booster jabs last September. Researchers at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases observed that even at 28 days after vaccination, average antibody levels in older people remained 1.5 times higher in those who had taken the Moderna booster. ST FILE PHOTO

Dr Young had co-authored the study which was published in SSRN, a science research journal, yesterday. It has yet to be peer-reviewed.

The study, conducted between Oct 12 and Dec 3 last year, involved 100 participants who had received the Pfizer shots as their primary series of Covid-19 vaccination.

Half of the participants were above 60 years old.

Researchers observed that even at 28 days after vaccination, average antibody levels in older people remained 1.5 times higher in those who had taken the Moderna booster. However, in younger adults, antibody levels were similar between the two vaccines.

The study involved blood samples collected 28 days before the

booster shot, on the day of the booster shot but before the injection, and seven days and 28 days after the shot.

For those older than 60, researchers noted that neutralising antibody levels against the Omicron variant with a Moderna booster were at 84.3 per cent 28 days after the shot versus 72.8 per cent with a Pfizer-BioNTech/Comirnaty booster. Neutralising antibodies are thought to play an important role in immunity against the coronavirus.

Dr Young said that based on the results of the study, taking any booster shot helps increase immunity against the Omicron variant, even though it has been found to be able to escape immunity among fully vaccinated people.

He added: "The magnitude of the antibody boost is likely to offer significant protection against infection with this variant."

"Individuals at higher risk of severe Covid-19, such as older adults 60 years old and above, are more likely to have low antibody levels six months after the primary vaccination series, so it is important that this group receives a booster shot."

NCID said the research is part of an ongoing study it is leading on different vaccine combinations and immunity. In the booster-shot study, it found that vaccine reactions were common but mild and short-lived. Common reactions were pain at the injection site within 72 hours of a booster jab, and fatigue, followed by muscle pain.

The study added that in the older age group, fever and weakness occurred more frequently in those who received Moderna as a booster dose, and that no participant had a serious side effect.

Researchers will continue to follow participants and collect blood samples six months and a year after their booster shots to monitor waning of antibody levels.

They will also study the effects of mixing the Covaxin vaccine into a vaccination regime.

NCID said it will include other vaccines in the future, including Nuvaxovid, and could involve up to 600 participants over a range of ages and ethnicities to reflect Singapore's population.

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## AT THE COURTS

### Jail for armed man who threatened to 'kill everyone'

Shaffiq Alkhatib  
Court Correspondent

A man who told his case manager at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) on Jan 13 that he wanted to "kill everyone" was found armed with a chopper at a public park later that day.

Mustaqim Zakaria, 22, was on Tuesday sentenced to 21 weeks' jail after he pleaded guilty to one count each of harassment and being in possession of the chopper.

His case was just one of several

heard in court this week that involved dangerous weapons.

On Wednesday alone, The Straits Times reported about three men who were charged after they allegedly hurt others with weapons in unrelated incidents.

One of them, Fadhil Yusop, 37, was handed one charge of voluntarily causing hurt with a samurai sword. Fadhil, who was caught on video swinging the weapon at pedestrians and several cars near Buangkok Square mall, is accused of committing the offence on Monday.

Another man, Mohd S. Muhibul-

lah Said Abdullah, 33, faces two charges of voluntarily causing hurt with a dangerous weapon.

He is accused of injuring two people with a razor blade at Block 59 Strathmore Avenue in Queenstown on Monday.

The third man, Leonard Goh Yew Cheng, 27, was handed one charge of voluntarily causing hurt to deter a public servant from his duty and two counts of possessing offensive weapons.

He allegedly threw a knife at a policeman in Bukit Batok on Monday, causing a bruise on the officer's cheek after its handle hit his face.

Separately, Ong Tai Weng, 47, appeared in a district court last week and was handed five charges for offences, including being in possession of different weapons in a Yishun flat last December. They included a nunchaku, which usually comprises two segments of wood or metal joined by a chain.

The cases involving Ong, Goh, Muhibullah and Fadhil are still pending.

As for Mustaqim, the court heard that he had called his case manager at IMH at around 5pm on Jan 13.

Court documents do not disclose why he had a case manager there.

He told the 26-year-old woman in Malay: "I want to kill people... I want to kill everyone."

Alarmed, she lodged a police report at around 5.20pm.

Officers then conducted an extensive islandwide search for Mustaqim and found him in Woodlands Waterfront Park at around 8.45pm that day.

They found a chopper in his possession.

Investigations revealed that after making the phone call, Mustaqim went to a supermarket and bought the weapon for \$8.90.

Deputy Public Prosecutor

Amanda Sum said: "The accused then removed the chopper from its packaging and concealed (the weapon inside a) plastic bag before boarding a public bus to Woodlands Waterfront Park, which is a public place.

"Investigations additionally revealed that the accused had purchased the said chopper as he wanted to kill his father because he was angry with the latter for disowning him."

Mustaqim did not have any lawful authority or purpose for arming himself with the chopper, the court heard.

For possessing a weapon, an offender can be jailed for up to two years and fined.

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### Man who supplied luxury goods to North Korea has jail term doubled

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A director of three companies that supplied prohibited luxury goods worth almost \$576,000 to North Korea has had his jail term doubled from three weeks to six weeks, after an appeal by the prosecution.

The fines handed down to the companies were also more than doubled or tripled by the High Court on Monday.

Singaporean Chong Hock Yen, 61, was the sole decision-maker of the three local companies - SCN Singapore, Sindok Trading and Laurich International.

Between December 2010 and November 2016, the companies supplied perfumes, cosmetics, watches and musical instruments to North Korea, grossing a total profit of more than \$122,000.

Under Singapore law, enacted to give effect to United Nations sanctions, anyone in the Republic is barred from supplying or selling designated items to entities in North Korea.

In raising Chong's jail term, High Court judge Aedit Abdullah said: "A more substantial sentence is called for, given that there was substantial harm to Singapore's standing and reputation, and the criminal activity occurred over a few years.

"Planning was present, indicating a higher degree of culpability. The fact that substantial profits were made should also push the sentence upwards."

Prosecutors had highlighted that Singapore came under increased scrutiny by the international community as a result of Chong's offences.

Justice Abdullah also said the

fines imposed by the lower court on the companies were too low and did not distinguish between the punitive and disgorging aspects of monetary punishment.

The judge raised the fine imposed on SCN from \$120,000 to \$311,000, which comprised \$200,000 as the punitive component and \$111,000 as disgorgement of profits.

The fine meted out to Sindok was increased from \$10,000 to \$23,000, with \$15,000 as the punitive component and \$8,000 as disgorgement of profits.

Laurich's fine was raised from \$10,000 to \$30,000, with a punitive component of \$27,000 and \$3,000 as disgorgement of profits.

Sindok is now known as BSS Global, while Laurich is now known as Gunnar Singapore.

Chong pleaded guilty in 2020 to eight counts of engaging in a conspiracy to supply luxury items to North Korea.

Another 35 similar charges were considered in sentencing.

His companies supplied luxury items to four entities in North Korea - Bugsae Shop, Korea Jangsaeng Trading Corporation (Pyongyang), MG Corporation and New Hope Joint Venture Corporation (Pyongyang).

SCN supplied the bulk of the goods to Bugsae Shop by air and sea through China and by hand at airport check-ins. Payment was made through offshore front companies.

In 2014, the maximum fine for flouting the sanctions was raised from \$100,000 to \$500,000 for individuals, and to \$1 million for companies. The maximum jail term for individuals was doubled from five years to 10 years.

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### 10 months' jail for infant care teacher who ill-treated one-year-old boy

Wong Shiying

An infant care teacher at a pre-school physically abused a one-year-old boy until his back was extensively bruised, and tried to cover her tracks by alluding that the baby boy had sensitive skin.

The child was crying in pain throughout the 30-minute ordeal but she ignored him.

The teacher, a 55-year-old Singaporean, was yesterday sentenced to 10 months' jail.

She cannot be named due to a gag order that protects the boy's identity.

She had earlier pleaded guilty to

an offence of ill-treating the child under the Children and Young Persons Act. A similar charge was taken into consideration for sentencing.

The court heard that the teacher, who is no longer at the pre-school, had been entrusted to take care of children up to 18 months old.

Her duties included feeding them, changing their nappies and guiding them with educational play activities.

On Dec 24, 2019, between 12.30pm and 1pm, the teacher committed multiple acts of abuse against the boy.

These included hitting him on his back at least 22 times, slam-

ming his face into a cushion, slapping his cheeks and shaking his arms roughly before slamming him onto the ground.

Shortly after, the teacher noticed that a big red patch was forming on the boy's back. About an hour later, the red patch was turning blue.

Realising that the boy's mother would notice her son's injuries, she pre-emptively sought to divert her suspicions.

The teacher texted the boy's mother before he was picked up from pre-school, asking if he had very sensitive skin.

She also apologised for "patting him to sleep a bit hard... (causing) his skin to have an outbreak".

The next day, the mother took her son to KK Women's and Children's Hospital and he was diagnosed with "alleged non-accidental injury with bruising on his back".

The hospital visit cost \$139.10 and the pre-school has since paid for it.

The offences came to light when the mother later viewed closed-circuit television footage of the incident and saw her child being physically abused.

She lodged a police report on Dec 31, 2019.

Seeking a one-year jail term, Deputy Public Prosecutor Gerald Tan said the victim is very young and cannot physically defend himself, or articulate the abuse he had suffered.

For ill-treating a child, an offender can be jailed for up to four years and fined up to \$4,000.

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### IMH nurse who slapped patient sentenced to 5 weeks' jail

Frustrated with a schizophrenic patient who swept the floor with his shirt, an Institute of Mental Health (IMH) staff nurse slapped him several times and tilted his commode chair until he almost fell off.

Ilyia Muhammad Afiq Nor Effendi, 26, was yesterday sentenced to five weeks' jail after pleading guilty to one count each of committing a rash act to endanger human life and voluntarily causing hurt.

A charge of using criminal force

on the 59-year-old patient was taken into consideration for his sentencing.

The court heard that the victim suffers from chronic schizophrenia and has been a patient at IMH since at least 2005. He is incapable of protecting himself from abuse due to his mental infirmity.

On Dec 8, 2019, Ilyia reported for his shift at 7am. IMH patients, including the victim, were scheduled for a haircut that morning.

At around 9.20am, Ilyia saw the victim sitting shirtless on his commode chair and sweeping the floor with the garment.

The nurse tilted the chair progressively for 13 seconds at a sharp angle, such that the victim almost fell off. He then forcefully yanked the chair backwards and walked away.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Phoebe Tan said: "He was accustomed to doing so, as he had previously tilted the victim's commode in a bid to stop the victim from meddling with rubbish on the floor. The victim had stopped his



Ilyia Muhammad Afiq Nor Effendi had slapped the patient several times and tilted his commode chair until he almost fell off.

acts in the past."

About 20 minutes later, Ilyia slapped the victim's upper back, shoulder and the back of his neck several times.

"By the accused's own estimates, the amount of force he applied was four to five on a scale of one to 10," said the DPP.

Footage of the abuse was caught on closed-circuit television cameras and shown in court.

When the victim was brought to the day lounge for his haircut, Ilyia noticed bruises around his right eye and gave him an ice pack.

The victim's bruises were caused by punches dealt by another staff nurse - Muhammad Ihsan Mahmud, 32.

Ilyia reported the injuries to

IMH's management, prompting a human resources manager to lodge a police report.

The victim was taken to hospital that day, where he was found with bruises on his head and a toe fracture.

Ilyia was issued a final written warning over the incident and he later resigned.

Two other IMH staff members have been punished for assaulting the victim that day. Ihsan was sentenced to nine weeks' jail in January last year for offences including splashing the victim's face with hand sanitiser and punching him.

Former IMH health attendant Sadasivam Kannan, 60, was jailed for three weeks in August last year for slapping the victim's head.

For committing a rash act to endanger human life, Ilyia could have been jailed for up to six months and fined up to \$2,500.

The maximum penalty for voluntarily causing hurt is a jail term of up to two years and a \$5,000 fine.

Wong Shiying