

AIR Spotlight - Measures to Tackle COVID-19 Pandemic

AIR Spotlight is an insightful program featured daily on the All India Radio Newsonair. In this program, many eminent panellists discuss issues of importance which can be quite helpful in [IAS exam](#) preparation. In this article, an interview discussing the “Measures to tackle COVID-19 Pandemic” is featured.

Participants:

1. **Lav Agarwal**, Joint Secretary, Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
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Context

Though the hospitalization rate is low with the [Omicron variant](#), it is more transmissible compared to other previous variants. In this context, there is a need for a recalibration of strategy to combat this challenge.

Details

- The Omicron variant is found to be highly transmissible with a shorter incubation period.
- Taking this into account along with evidence from around the world, the ongoing strategy based on the five principles is still applicable.
- The five principles of the ongoing strategy include,
 - Test
 - Track
 - Treat
 - Vaccination
 - Adherence to [COVID](#) appropriate behaviour
- Since the infection from Omicron is found to be mild, a large number of patients will be prescribed home isolation and hence it is important to focus on containing the spread of the virus by strict implementation of protocols.
- In this regard, community awareness and support become key in tackling the challenges.

Data-driven approach

- The COVID 19 management in India has been primarily data-driven since the start of the pandemic.
- A COVID Portal was created, which integrated data from across the districts that helped to predict the trajectory of infections and take appropriate actions.
- The data from the portal was used:
 - In the implementation of public health actions.
 - To strengthen the public health infrastructure.
 - Also, helped to understand the requirement of additional changes in clinical management protocols.

Revised Guidelines for Home Isolation

- Since about 80 to 90 percent of the cases are mild and asymptomatic, a large number of patients were expected to choose home isolation.
- Taking this into consideration the guidelines for home isolation were revised.
- Revised guidelines:
 - The patient should be clinically assigned as a mild/asymptomatic case by the treating Medical Officer.
 - Such cases should have sufficient facilities at their residence for self-isolation and for quarantining the family contacts.
 - A caregiver (preferably a fully vaccinated person) should be available to provide care on a 24x7 basis.
 - A communication link between the caregiver and a Medical Officer is a prerequisite for the entire duration of home isolation.
 - Patients aged more than 60 years and those with comorbidities such as Hypertension, Diabetes, Heart disease, Chronic lung/liver/kidney disease, suffering from immunocompromised status, etc. shall only be allowed home isolation after proper evaluation by the treating medical officer.

<p>Instructions for the patient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify separate, well-ventilated room; • Use triple layer mask and discard in a paper bag after 72 hours, cutting into pieces; • Maintain adequate hydration; • Follow respiratory etiquettes; • Follow hand hygiene;
<p>Instructions for caregivers (caregiver must be fully vaccinated)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use triple layer mask and discard in a paper bag after 72 hours, cutting into pieces; • Replace mask immediately if wet or dirty with secretion; • Follow hand hygiene; • Avoid touching face, nose or mouth;

Image source: Government of India – MoHFW

Role of Vaccines

- With the spread of infections at an unprecedented rate triggering a fresh wave, doubts have been raised about the efficacy of vaccines administered.
- In this context, there is a need for reiterating the role of vaccines in curbing the transmission of the virus.
- Evidence from across the globe suggests that,
 - If fully vaccinated the chances of infection even from omicron is low.
 - The chances of hospitalizations are also very less if fully vaccinated.
 - The chances of severe infections are also meagre.

Measures to Tackle Vaccine Hesitancy

- The communication strategy with the community leaders to gather their support in spreading the awareness.
- Involving grass-root level members such as Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers, Auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) to educate people and help deliver vaccines to remote areas.

- Also, the involvement of NGOs and other community-based organizations has helped reach the milestone of providing 150 crores of vaccine doses.

Additional Efforts

- Based on the emerging evidence, the vaccination program has been extended to the age group of 15 – 17 year-olds.
- Also, a precautionary dose is being administered to the healthcare workers, frontline workers, and people aged above 60 with comorbidities.
- Discussions to extend the precautionary dose to other categories of people are also ongoing.
- The government announced the “**India COVID 19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Package: Phase II**”.
 - The Union Cabinet under the initiative has approved a ₹23,123 crore package to boost emergency response and healthcare systems.
- Under **Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure mission:**
 - The government has laid out a spending budget of Rs 64,180 crore for the FY 2021-22 to 2025-26 to upgrade the health infrastructure of the country.

Conclusion

The adherence to the five-fold strategy which helped in addressing the challenges of previous waves, along with ensuring proper implementation of new guidelines will be the critical determinants in the fight against the omicron surge.