

# Deep implications for Singapore as Covid-19 is termed a pandemic



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SINGAPORE - The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared Covid-19 a pandemic due to "alarming levels" of its spread and severity. As the cases continue **spreading like wildfire** globally, more measures and more **disruptions to daily lives** can be expected here.

Singapore has 178 cases, of which 96 have been discharged, and has not seen any deaths yet. However, worldwide, some 4,291 people have lost their lives, with the number of Covid-19 cases crossing 118,000 in 114 countries.

Declaring Covid-19 **a global pandemic** is a warning that the world must take this disease very seriously and act quickly to **contain and mitigate it**. "We cannot say this loudly enough, or clearly enough, or often enough: All countries can still change the course of this pandemic," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of WHO at a press briefing in Geneva on Wednesday (March 11).

"The challenge for many countries which are now dealing with large clusters or **community transmission** is not whether they can do the same, it's whether they will."

The actions of other countries have **have a direct bearing on** Singapore, which is a **global flight hub**, attracts many visitors, and is fairly integrated into the world economy. Any visitors with

## Virus explosion



### OUTBREAK

- Increase in number of cases of disease
- Limited to community or particular geographic area; may also affect several countries
- Normally caused by an infection, transmitted through person-to-person or animal-to-person contact, or from the environment

**Example: Seasonal influenza**



### EPIDEMIC

- Sudden increase in number of disease cases
- Infections are above what is normally expected in population in that area; can spread to other areas or countries
- Can affect people within a short period of time

**Example: Severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars)**



### PANDEMIC

- Disease usually affects a large number of people
- Has spread across several countries or continents
- Viruses that have caused past pandemics typically originated from animal flu viruses

**Example: 2009 swine flu (H1N1)**

Source: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Covid-19 can spread the disease and form new clusters here. But if visitors stop coming, Singapore businesses suffer.

It has been 11 years since the WHO declared the H1N1 swine flu in 2009 a pandemic, though that turned out to be milder than expected in most countries. Previous pandemics include the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, which was the deadliest in history, affecting one-third of the world's population and wiping out at least 40 million people.

Although WHO defines pandemic as the global spread of a new disease, the word pandemic may be associated with widespread, unstoppable spread of the disease. Covid-19 is the first pandemic fuelled by a coronavirus, though Dr Tedros also stressed that it is the first pandemic that can be contained with **urgent and aggressive action**.

The outbreak has ballooned into a pandemic less than three months after news of the coronavirus disease first emerged from China. Some **infectious disease experts** say that the problem with calling it a pandemic is that it may steer some countries away from containment measures into pure mitigation mode.

"The problem with calling it a pandemic is that there's a risk that everyone would stop trying to contain it," he said. "Now, in this disease, you can always contain it. In fact, containing it is part of mitigation, if every case you prevent is less you have to deal with."

At the same, mitigation measures must be put in place to deal with the cases.

"We've **ramped up all the efforts**. Every hospital knows what they're going to do, where they're going to create more beds, have more isolation beds," said Prof Fisher of Singapore's preparedness.

If the disease continues to spread rapidly around the world, even if number of cases here remains low, the risk of imported cases **triggering a spike in cases** is high.

"Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause **unreasonable fear**, or **unjustified acceptance** that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death," said Dr Tedros.

"Describing the situation as a pandemic does not change WHO's assessment of **the threat posed by** this virus. It doesn't change what WHO is doing, and it doesn't change what countries should do."

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, the infectious diseases programme leader at NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said "As things stand, it is increasingly clear that the pandemic and the risk from the virus will continue for many more months, and sustainability of efforts will be **a critical consideration**."

Senior Minister of State for Health and Transport Lam Pin Min had said previously that current precautions are not sustainable if there is a full-blown pandemic.

In the case of a pandemic, **travel restrictions** might have to be replaced by measures like rigorous screening at airports so that life can still go on, he had said.

Also, now that the P word is out, it **remains to be seen** whether the novel coronavirus risk alert level remains orange or gets raised to red if cases just keep rising.

The Health Ministry's chief health scientist, Professor Tan Chor Chuan, had told The Straits Times around mid-February that Singapore will continue to **contact trace patients**, and practise isolation and quarantine in order to **ringfence this spread**.

"Going forward, if we find that it's harder to control, then we may have to put in place additional measures like social distancing, such as not having big events where a lot of people come together, or even closure of schools," said Prof Tan.

"These are the kind of things that we are thinking about and preparing for. We will need to see how the conditions develop, before we consider triggering them."

**Social responsibility** - like staying at home if you are unwell and halting large indoor gatherings - has become critical.

"If you're not responsible, then the Government has to take drastic actions. There's no choice if people keep going to crowded restaurants and getting infected. Then it would be a natural step to say, 'Okay, we're closing the restaurants.' Now, who wins out of that? People can't go to restaurants and the restaurant loses money."

As Dr Tedros had said in his remarks: "This is not just a **public health crisis**, it is a crisis that will touch every sector - so every sector and every individual must be involved in the fight."

*Source: The Straits Times*