

TARIKH : 4 FEBRUARI 2022
AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 2

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Return to normalcy in sight as vaccination drive for children begins

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KUALA LUMPUR: With Malaysia's vaccination coverage now extended to children, the country is gearing itself for the lifting of Covid-19 curbs and a return to pre-pandemic normalcy.

Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin described the newly-launched National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme for Children (PICKids) as "the final puzzle piece", with nearly the entire population eligible to receive protection from Covid-19.

However, he said the lifting of Covid-19 curbs will be done carefully and gradually, which will likely see business hours allowed to operate around-the-clock but mask-wearing to remain.

"Now that we have kick-started PICKids, we can give protection to the last group of our population.

"Once we have completed vaccinating this group and when the number of people who have received booster shots has reached a satisfactory level, the ministry will propose to the government to allow more relaxations.

"There are few restrictions that we still have such as border control and mandatory quarantine. I already have a plan of how we can reach a stage where we feel safe and comfortable to open up even more.

"With a good health system in place, we will be able to expand our economic recovery plans," he said at the launch of PICKids at Hospital Tunku Azizah here yesterday.

Khairy said the government will not lift Covid-19 restrictions drastically like Denmark and England have done recently, where face coverings are no longer mandatory and nightclubs are allowed to reopen.

"Our approach in terms of reopening the economy will be calibrated, targeted and proportionate.

"Even though we have one of the best vaccination programmes in the world, we will still adopt a careful approach.

"We will allow more freedom but as for mask-wearing, that will stay for the foreseeable future.

"As for extending opening hours of businesses, yes, we will be looking into that," said Khairy.

He added that the ministry is also looking to review its current Covid-19 quarantine requirements, but it will only do so after monitoring the infection situation following the Chinese New Year festivities.

Khairy said the ministry is still deciding on the best vaccination take up rate where the country can start opening up.

"The ministry is still undergoing an internal discussion on what the threshold should be in terms of

booster or children vaccination rates before recommending the government to open up.

"I have an idea, but I do not want to announce just yet. But we are almost there. Once we are firm, we will make the recommendation to the Ministerial Quartet," he said.

He said that while the country has hit a 55% vaccination rate for adults, there are still many adults who are reluctant to get their booster shots.

"We want to open borders and ease up on restrictions, so for those who are eligible for boosters but have not taken them, please do so.

"As for children, we are not aiming for 100% but we would like to achieve a good percentage. The threshold will be determined later," Khairy added.

Separately, Senior Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein confirmed that the Covid-19 Quartet Ministers Meeting will

be held soon to discuss Malaysia's transition to the endemic phase.

He told *The Star* that the meeting will be fixed soon according to the ministers' availability now that the Chinese New Year holiday is over.

"At the moment all the matters mentioned by the Health Minister are on the agenda for the quartet.

"I am working very closely with him. Now that Chinese New Year is over, we will try and fix a meeting soon when everyone is available," Hishammuddin said when contacted yesterday.

On Jan 11, Hishammuddin had said the government was postponing the plan to move into the endemic phase, saying that it would only proceed once the country can manage several unexpected incidents in the country.

This included the massive floods affecting several states as well as the spread of the Omicron variant among returnees from abroad.