

THE STRAITS TIMES

No need to ask employees with Covid-19 for medical certificate: Tan See Leng



This appeal comes amid reports of long lines at clinics and emergency departments, said Manpower Minister Tan See Leng. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH



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SINGAPORE - All employers here should not request medical certificates from workers who test positive for Covid-19 as the healthcare system continues to face stresses from rising infections amid the Omicron wave, Manpower Minister Tan See Leng said on Tuesday (Feb 22).

Employers and company HR departments should familiarise themselves with prevailing Covid-19 health protocols and excuse employees from returning to their workplaces for the periods required, he told reporters at an interview at the Ministry of Manpower's headquarters in Havelock Road.

There is also no need to require employees to produce recovery memos or medical assessments from a doctor before allowing them to go back to work after the required isolation period, the minister said.

Singaporeans who want to get an official infection record can make an appointment to undergo a self-administered antigen rapid test (ART) under supervision at one of the combined test centres or quick test centres around the island.

These tests will be fully funded by the Government until March 15, and the test results will be reflected on one's HealthHub status within 30 minutes.

Those who undergo supervised ARTs at these testing centres will also get an SMS notification of their test results, which can be used as documentary proof of past infection.

Dr Tan said the stress on the healthcare system here has been felt especially acutely by general practitioner clinics, polyclinics and hospital emergency departments (EDs).

"The GPs and the EDs report that a great majority of patients who go to them have either no symptoms or mild symptoms. Doctors have also shared that many patients have been visiting them for the sole purpose of obtaining medical certificates just so they can submit them to their workplaces," he said.

"I want to reiterate that these visits are not necessary and they risk compromising the standard of care for other patients who genuinely require medical care."

Dr Tan said he was making this appeal in the light of reports on social media and feedback from colleagues about long lines at clinics and emergency departments here.

"My encouragement, my strong exhortation to everyone is that if you have very mild symptoms or no symptoms of Covid-19, there is no need for you to go to the GP clinic, to the polyclinics or to the EDs of public hospitals just to get an MC.

"You should just be able to tell your employers that you are not well and that you have tested ART-positive.

"I think it's important to gain everyone's cooperation, everyone's support, in this particular period, especially given the fact that there is quite a fair bit of resource constraints."

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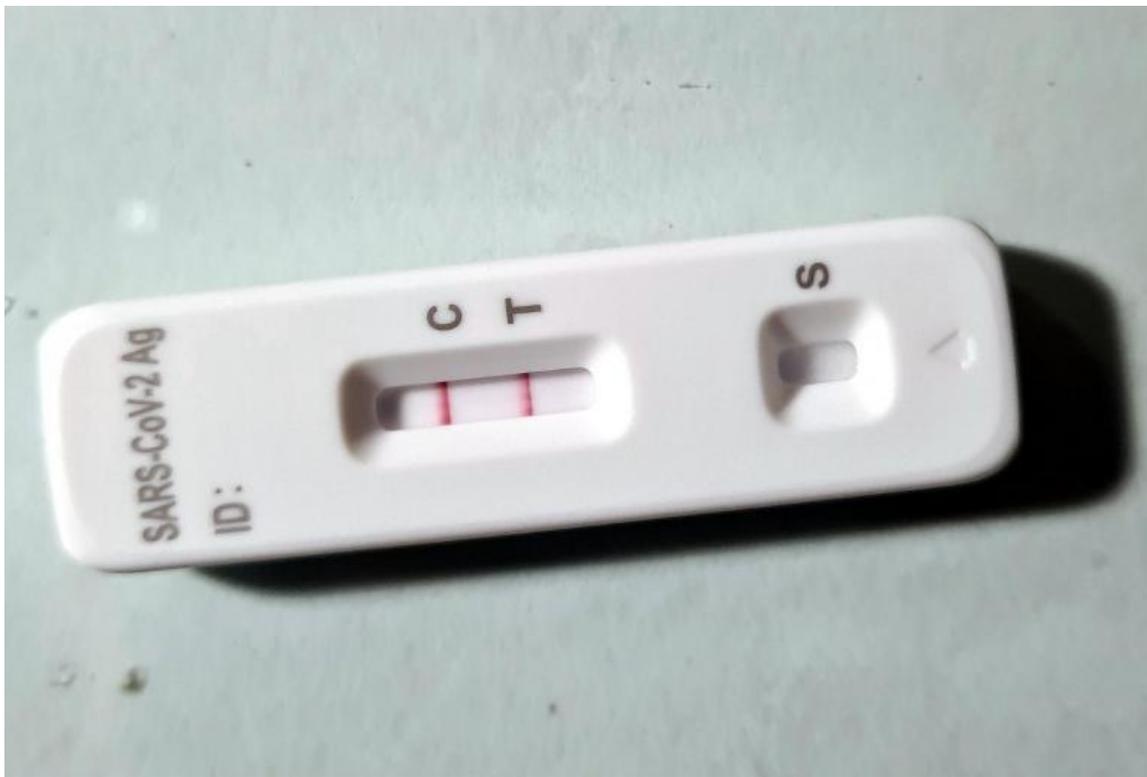
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Dr Tan said he understood that there may be concerns about absenteeism, but he called upon HR departments and HR managers to be more understanding.

"This is just a phase we are going through," he said.

"You don't have to add an additional administrative burden, or bureaucratic hurdles, for this entire process, especially during this period of time."



In a written reply to a question filed by Jurong GRC MP Xie Yao Quan in Parliament last Friday, Dr Tan had said that the Ministry of Manpower, the Singapore National Employers Federation and the National Trades Union Congress have not come across disputes arising from employers not adhering to guidelines on Covid-19 protocols, which include allowing workers to self-isolate under Protocol 2 without an MC.

Protocol 2 involves isolating at home for the first 72 hours after testing positive, taking an ART afterwards, and ending isolation after getting a negative result.

Employees whose employers insist on MCs for sick leave for Covid-19 infection should refer their employers [to this website](#) or approach MOM for further assistance, Dr Tan had said.

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Raffles Medical Group said it has seen an increase of about 15 per cent in patients visiting its 33 Raffles Medical clinics.

Most have genuine acute respiratory infection (ARI) symptoms, such as fever and sore throat, it added.

Similarly, Dr Raymond Ong, managing director at Intemedical 24 Hour Clinic, said he has seen 20 per cent to 30 per cent more patients compared with the month before, and many of them have ARI symptoms.

He agreed that if patients who test positive for Covid-19 do not have severe illness and have their own medication to relieve symptoms, there is no need for them to see a GP.

But he said it is common behaviour for those who are sick to see a doctor, noting that there is still a lot of fear about the coronavirus.

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Dr Cheryl Glenn, medical director of Sata CommHealth, said some of the charitable healthcare organisation's clinics have seen a four to fivefold increase in patients with ARI, and a similar increase in patients referred to its clinics for Covid-19 testing.

"We routinely give MCs to all ARI patients. Many require MCs. But we have been seeing more patients requiring medication as well," she said.

Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) executive director Alvin Goh said he believes HR departments here are clear on the various Covid-19 protocols, and that they should communicate them clearly to employees.

On its part, SHRI has sent out information on the new protocols to its members, but line managers and employees themselves must also be aware, said Mr Goh.

"At times... the wrong information may have been passed on that MCs are required to be submitted," he added.

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Dr David Leong, managing director of PeopleWorldwide Consulting, an HR search and advisory firm, said there are understandably some employers who are not familiar with Covid-19 protocols and concerned about abuse.

But he said this is a transition period and called on employers to give more leeway, noting that many employees continue to work while in isolation.

"I would not worry about the small percentage of workers who might report sick and malingering... There must be a certain trust in such situations."

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