

CHP appeals for heightened vigilance against upper respiratory tract infection

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (September 24) urged members of the public to enhance their vigilance against upper respiratory tract infection (URTI) as an increasing number of URTI outbreaks in schools have been recorded recently.

The CHP has recently received increased reports of institutional URTI outbreaks. A total of 101 URTI outbreaks affecting 611 persons were reported in the past two weeks (September 10 to 23), compared to 10 URTI outbreaks affecting 52 persons recorded in the previous two weeks (August 27 to September 9). The majority of the outbreaks reported in the past two weeks occurred in kindergartens/child care centres (76 per cent), followed by primary schools (18 per cent), and there were six outbreaks involving special child care centres (6 per cent).

A spokesman for the CHP said, "Young children, the elderly and patients with chronic diseases are prone to respiratory tract infection and its complications. As schools are collective assembly places, infectious diseases could easily spread among people through their daily contacts."

In view of that, the CHP today issued letters to schools and doctors to appeal for heightened vigilance and appropriate actions. To prevent outbreaks of respiratory tract infection including COVID-19, it is of prime importance that children with fever, regardless of the presence of respiratory symptoms, should not be allowed to attend school. They should wear a mask and consult doctors promptly. Schools should check the body temperature of all students every day when they arrive at school so as to identify students with fever. Moreover, staff should also check their temperature before work every day. Students and staff with fever or respiratory illnesses should not go to school and should seek medical attention immediately. Doctors are also urged to remain vigilant and arrange testing for respiratory infections for all patients presenting with acute respiratory symptoms.

"Symptoms of URTI and other respiratory infections, including influenza and COVID-19, could be similar. It could be difficult to differentiate them clinically. Therefore, members of the public should get vaccinated as soon as possible as it is crucial in coping with the COVID-19 epidemic. Testing of COVID-19 at an earlier stage to facilitate earlier case detection also plays a vital role. The CHP has earlier adopted the most stringent precautionary measures under which a school will be required to suspend all classes or relevant levels immediately for five days if an outbreak of URTI or other respiratory infections in the school is established. The school concerned will also be included in a compulsory testing notice (CTN), under which staff and students of the school will be required to undergo a COVID-19 nucleic acid test in accordance with the CTN so as to identify the infected persons

as early as possible and minimise the risk of transmission in schools and the community," the spokesman said.

Meanwhile, the public should maintain good personal and environmental hygiene against influenza, COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses:

- Receive seasonal influenza vaccination for personal protection;
- Surgical masks can prevent transmission of respiratory viruses from ill persons. It is essential for persons who are symptomatic (even if having mild symptoms) to wear a surgical mask;
- Wear a surgical mask when taking public transport or staying in crowded places. It is important to wear a mask properly, including performing hand hygiene before wearing and after removing a mask;
- Avoid touching one's eyes, mouth and nose;
- Wash hands with liquid soap and water properly whenever possibly contaminated;
- When hands are not visibly soiled, clean them with 70 to 80 per cent alcohol-based handrub;
- Cover the nose and mouth with tissue paper when sneezing or coughing. Dispose of soiled tissue paper properly into a lidded rubbish bin, and wash hands thoroughly afterwards;
- Maintain good indoor ventilation;
- When having respiratory symptoms, wear a surgical mask, refrain from work or attending classes at school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly; and
- Maintain a balanced diet, exercise regularly, take adequate rest, do not smoke and avoid overstress.

Members of the public, particularly children, the elderly and those with chronic diseases, should wear a face mask and consult a doctor promptly if they develop symptoms of respiratory tract infection.

Information on seasonal influenza vaccination and COVID-19 vaccination is available on the websites www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/100632.html and www.covidvaccine.gov.hk respectively.