

CHP geared up to tackle new Mpox variant

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) said today (November 1) that preparations have been well on track to handle the global Mpox outbreak and any possible imported cases of the new strain Clade Ib, which is prevalent in some African countries, and the CHP will continue to closely monitor the trend of the international spread of the new Mpox strain. Members of the public are reminded to heighten vigilance, avoid close physical contact with persons suspected of contracting Mpox and seek medical advice as soon as possible if symptoms appear. Meanwhile, high-risk target groups are advised to receive Mpox vaccinations.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Mpox outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on August 14 this year. In recent weeks, there has been a sustained increase in the number of Mpox cases and outbreaks reported in African countries. According to the WHO, as at October 27, at least 19 African countries reported Mpox outbreaks, with a total of 10 722 laboratory confirmed cases and 36 deaths among them recorded; more than 40 000 suspected cases and more than 1 000 deaths among them recorded during the same period. Following the discovery of a new Mpox strain with sustained transmission in Africa at the end of 2023, there have been signs of spread to countries outside Africa, including Sweden, Thailand, India, Germany and the United Kingdom, and the vast majority of cases of the new Mpox strain found in countries outside Africa had travel history to Africa.

According to the limited scientific information currently available, the new Mpox strain may be more easily transmitted from human to human, such as within the family through various forms of close contact (including intimate contact other than sexual contact), but there is no evidence that it can be transmitted through daily social contact. In addition, infection with the new Mpox strain may result in more severe disease and higher mortality than the conventional strain (Clade IIb) that has been circulating globally since 2022. The CHP will continue to monitor the latest scientific information on Mpox, its mode of transmission and control measures.

Hong Kong has put in place the Preparedness and Response Plan for Mpox (the Plan) since June 2022 and activated the alert response level under the Plan after the first confirmed case of Mpox in September of the same year. The CHP has implemented a series of measures (including enhanced surveillance, contact tracing, public education and vaccination, etc) which have been effective in preventing local outbreaks of Mpox in the past two years. As at October 31 this year, a total of 68 Mpox cases (54 local and 14 imported) have been recorded in Hong Kong, of which 14 cases were recorded this year. All 68 patients were male, with high-risk contacts prior to the onset of the disease, and were infected with the conventional Mpox strain.

The CHP has been working closely with the Hospital Authority on the epidemiological investigation and contact tracing of Mpox cases, and has refined the preparatory works in response to the latest epidemic development. In view of the fact that the new Mpox strain can be transmitted through close contact other than sexual contact, the CHP has updated the quarantine arrangements for close contacts since mid-August. The close contacts (such as household contacts, sexual contacts and persons who have had direct contact with the patients' body fluids) of confirmed patients who had visited Africa during the incubation periods are subject to compulsory quarantine at public hospitals or other quarantine facilities until laboratory investigation of samples from the cases has been completed with the new Mpox strain being ruled out. If the laboratory investigation result turns out to be the new Mpox strain, the relevant close contacts will have to remain in quarantine for a period of 21 days (counting from the last day of exposure to the confirmed case) to minimise the risk of transmission in the local community.

With the emergence of the new Mpox strain, the DH has stepped up its Mpox-related health education work to provide the latest health information to the public and inbound travellers, including educating the public on how to prevent Mpox infection through various channels in the community and stepping up the publicity and health education on the prevention of Mpox at border control points.

The CHP commenced the Mpox Vaccination Programme in October 2022, using a third-generation vaccine on a voluntary basis for contacts of confirmed cases as well as individuals at high risk of exposure. From the commencement of the programme to October 27 this year, around 17 900 doses of vaccines were administered. Mpox vaccine is effective against the currently prevalent Mpox strains. At present, there is an adequate supply of vaccines in Hong Kong. The CHP appeals to high-risk target groups to receive Mpox vaccinations with a view to lowering the risk of infection or the possibility of having more severe symptoms after infection. Apart from all of the DH's Social Hygiene Service Clinics, high-risk target groups can receive Mpox vaccinations at Yau Ma Tei Integrated Treatment Centre under the DH's Special Preventive Programme with no prior appointment is needed.

In addition to the vaccination programme, the CHP has also set up an Mpox telephone hotline (2125 2373). The hotline operates from Monday to Friday (excluding public holidays) from 9am to 5pm, which enables persons who suspect or are concerned they have had high-risk contact with confirmed patients to make enquiries and receive relevant health advices.

The DH will continue to closely monitor the global epidemiological situation and make preparations to prevent the spread of Mpox. The Plan for Mpox published by the Government is available on the CHP's website (www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/preparedness_and_response_plan_for_monkeypox_eng.pdf).