

CHP provides latest information on COVID-19's Variant of Concern, Omicron

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) today (November 27) said that since it announced on November 25 two confirmed cases carried viruses which belonged to a newly emerged lineage, B.1.1.529, the CHP has been closely monitoring and following up the latest development of the mutant strain concerned. In view of the latest announcement by the World Health Organization (WHO) concerning the Omicron variant, the Government implemented last night (November 26) the most stringent boarding and quarantine requirements for eight places in southern Africa. Starting tomorrow (November 28), the CHP will further strengthen the quarantine and testing requirements for Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) residents arriving from the relevant places, including arranging them to stay in quarantine centre for seven days.

The WHO has designated B.1.1.529 as a Variant of Concern and named it Omicron on November 26 (Geneva time). The mutant strain possesses a large number of mutations and it was first reported to the WHO from South Africa on November 24. In addition, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, this mutant strain is the most divergent variant during the COVID-19 pandemic so far. This raises concerns that it may be associated with increased transmissibility, reduction in vaccine effectiveness and increased risk for reinfections.

According to official sources, apart from the information on mutant strain involving two cases provided by the HKSAR Government, the Omicron variant has been detected in a number of places including Botswana, South Africa, Israel and Belgium. To facilitate further risk assessment, the CHP has contacted the health authorities of Israel and Belgium for details about the imported cases there.

Locally, according to the whole genome sequencing conducted by the DH's Public Health Laboratory Services Branch, there are so far two cases which had been announced earlier (cases 12388 and 12404) detected to be carrying the Omicron variant. The CHP has earlier arranged for persons who had stayed from November 11 to 14 in the three rooms to the left and to the right of the two rooms concerned (Rooms 5111 and 5112) of Regal Airport Hotel to undergo compulsory quarantine at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre for 14 days. No new related case was detected so far.

The Government has been closely monitoring the latest scientific data on mutant strains as well as the epidemic situation of various places and will adjust the boarding, quarantine and testing requirements for persons arriving at Hong Kong from relevant places based on the risk levels as the situation warrants. In view of the latest developments of the Omicron variant, started from 0.00am today, along with South Africa which was already a Group A specified place, the Government also specified Botswana, as well as the

adjacent Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe as Group A specified places. Non-Hong Kong residents who have stayed in these places within 21 days will not be allowed to enter Hong Kong. Details on the relevant boarding and compulsory quarantine requirements for respective specified places can be found at www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/inbound-travel.html.

Under existing requirement, persons who have stayed in high-risk Group A specified places on the day of boarding for/arrival at Hong Kong or during the 21 days before that day can only board flights for Hong Kong if they are HKSAR residents who are fully vaccinated and hold a recognised vaccination record. Upon arrival, they have to undergo compulsory quarantine for 21 days in a designated quarantine hotel and undergo six tests during compulsory quarantine, followed by self-monitoring for the subsequent seven days, and have to undergo compulsory testing in a community testing centre on the 26th day of arrival at Hong Kong.

To enhance the surveillance on the Omicron variant, starting from 0.00am tomorrow, the CHP will require HKSAR residents arriving from the eight places in southern Africa concerned to undergo quarantine at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre for seven days, during which they have to undergo testing every day and their health conditions will be monitored by healthcare professionals. Upon completion of the seven-day quarantine at quarantine centre, they will be allowed to finish the rest of the compulsory quarantine requirement at the designated quarantine hotel which they have reserved. They are also required to undergo testing on the 9th, 12th, 16th and 19th day and another compulsory testing in a community testing centre on the 26th day of arrival at Hong Kong.

The Government has also stepped up its surveillance on designated quarantine hotels and will ensure their compliance to the infection control requirements at all times. Persons undergoing quarantine are reminded again that they must keep the windows in the hotel room closed and wear the surgical masks when they open the room door.

The spokesman for the CHP said, "Although there are not any direct passenger flights arriving Hong Kong from the eight places in southern Africa concerned currently, we noticed the presence of the Omicron variant in a number of places globally. We must stay vigilant and implement the most stringent anti-epidemic measures to prevent the mutant strain from entering the local community. We will review the effectiveness of those anti-epidemic measures from time to time."