

CHP urges public to stay vigilant against infectious diseases during Lunar New Year holiday

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (January 17) reminded the public to maintain strict hand, personal, food and environmental hygiene to guard against seasonal influenza and other common and travel-related infectious diseases in the Lunar New Year holiday, both locally and when travelling abroad.

A. Seasonal influenza

Hong Kong has already entered the 2019-20 winter influenza season and seasonal influenza activity has continued to increase in the past week. It is anticipated that local seasonal influenza activity will continue to rise in the coming weeks and remain at an elevated level for some time.

Among the respiratory specimens received by the Public Health Laboratory Services Branch of the CHP, the percentage that tested positive for seasonal influenza A and B viruses has continued to rise to 17.46 per cent last week (week ending January 11) from 10.35 per cent in previous week. It was above the baseline threshold of 9.21 per cent. Among the positive influenza detections in the past two weeks, the most common subtype was influenza A(H1) (around 70 per cent), followed by influenza A(H3) (around 27 per cent), while very few influenza B viruses were detected.

The overall admission rate with principal diagnosis of influenza in public hospitals further increased to 0.70 per 10 000 population last week from 0.46 per 10 000 population recorded in the previous week, which was above the baseline threshold of 0.25.

The number of institutional influenza-like illness outbreaks reported to the CHP was 39 last week. In the first four days of this week, the CHP recorded 53 outbreaks. Among these 92 outbreaks (affecting 443 persons), the majority occurred in kindergartens/child care centres (41), followed by primary schools (29), residential care homes for the elderly (nine), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (five), secondary schools (three) and others (five).

As it takes about two weeks to develop antibodies, members of the public are advised to receive seasonal influenza vaccination (SIV) early for protection against seasonal influenza.

A spokesman for the CHP said, "Besides high-risk groups such as the elderly, children and persons with chronic illnesses, healthy people may also contract influenza and develop complications. Noting that the vaccination rate among people aged 50 to 64 is lower compared with other groups, we

appeal to those in the age group to receive SIV early via the Vaccination Subsidy Scheme to safeguard the health of themselves and their families."

Globally, influenza activity continued to increase in the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere. The winter influenza season is under way in the United States (US), Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, Mainland China, Macao and Taiwan.

The spokesman reminded those who have plans to travel during the Lunar New Year to pay special attention to the influenza situations of their travel destinations before departure. Travellers to areas with high influenza activity should adopt appropriate personal protective measures and take heed of personal hygiene and may consider putting on surgical masks when staying in crowded or poorly ventilated public places.

B. Severe respiratory disease associated with a novel infectious agent

Severe respiratory disease associated with a novel infectious agent refers to pneumonia cases associated with the novel coronavirus occurring in Wuhan, Hubei Province. According to risk assessment of the World Health Organization (WHO), the reported link of this cluster of pneumonia to a wholesale fish and live animal market could indicate an exposure link to animals. To prevent pneumonia and respiratory tract infection, the public should maintain good personal hygiene at all times and keep both hands clean. In particular, when travelling outside Hong Kong, they should:

- Avoid visiting hospitals. If it is necessary to visit a hospital, put on a surgical mask and observe strict personal and hand hygiene;
- Avoid touching animals (including game), poultry/birds or their droppings;
- Avoid visiting wet markets, live poultry markets or farms;
- Avoid making close contact with patients, especially those with symptoms of acute respiratory infections;
- Do not consume game meat and do not patronise food premises where game meat is served.

C. Measles

There has been a global resurgence of measles since 2018. In 2019, outbreaks occurred in some places that had achieved measles elimination, such as Japan, Macao, New Zealand, the UK and the US. The incidence in some neighbouring countries was at a very high level last year, including New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand. The large outbreak in the Philippines has resulted in over 42 000 cases in 2019. Among the 91 measles cases recorded in Hong Kong last year, 40 (44 per cent) were classified as imported cases including six cases affecting foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) working in Hong Kong.

The spokesman said, "Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent measles. To boost the community's herd immunity against measles, the CHP

launched a one-off mop-up programme to provide free measles vaccination to FDHs working in Hong Kong last year. Eligible FDHs are urged to use the opportunity to receive measles vaccination to protect themselves, their families and their employers' families before the programme ends on February 15. For details and appointment methods, please visit the CHP's website www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/102004.html."

Public who are planning to travel to places with a high incidence or outbreaks of measles should review their vaccination history and past medical history, especially people born outside Hong Kong who might not have received measles vaccination during childhood. Those who have not received two doses of measles-containing vaccines, with unknown vaccination history or with unknown immunity against measles are urged to consult a doctor for advice on vaccination at least two weeks before departure.

The spokesman reminded that pregnant women and women preparing for pregnancy who are not immune to measles as well as children aged under 1 year who are not due for the first dose of the measles, mumps and rubella-combined vaccine under the [Hong Kong Childhood Immunisation Programme](#) should not travel to places with outbreaks of measles.

D. Middle East Respiratory Syndrome

The public should pay attention to cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) abroad. Countries in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, continue to report MERS cases from time to time, and travellers should refrain from going to farms, barns or markets with camels and avoid contact with sick persons and animals, especially camels. Most of the cases reported in the Middle East had history of exposure to camels, consumption of camel milk or contact with other MERS patients.

"From time to time, suspected MERS cases reported to the CHP for investigation involved patients with a history of contact with camels in the Middle East. The CHP strongly advises travel agents organising tours to the Middle East to abstain from arranging camel rides and activities involving direct contact with camels, which are known risk factors for acquiring MERS Coronavirus," the spokesman said.

E. Dengue fever

From January 10 to 16, the CHP recorded three imported dengue fever (DF) cases. The patients had been to Vietnam (two cases) and the Philippines (one case) during the incubation period.

As of January 16, a total of seven cases of DF had been recorded in 2020, all of which were imported cases from countries including the Philippines (four), Vietnam (two) and Thailand (one). In 2019, 198 cases were recorded (comprising 197 imported cases and one local case).

The CHP has been closely monitoring the latest DF situation in neighbouring and overseas areas. DF is endemic in many tropical and

subtropical areas of the world. According to the WHO, some Asian countries were experiencing unusually high numbers of DF cases in 2019. The numbers of cases in some countries, including Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, were significantly higher than the numbers in 2018.

To prevent mosquito-borne diseases, travellers should wear loose, light-coloured, long-sleeved tops and trousers and apply insect repellent containing DEET to clothing or exposed parts of the body. Travellers returning from areas affected by DF and Zika virus infection should apply insect repellent for 14 days or at least 21 days respectively upon arrival in Hong Kong.

F. Food poisoning

"In the festive season, food and environmental hygiene are the keys to preventing food poisoning. While some may cook for the Family Reunion Dinner and the New Year Feast, some may choose poon Choi takeaway as an alternative. When collecting and transporting poon Choi, make sure it is kept at above 60 degrees Celsius. Before consuming poon Choi, it should be reheated thoroughly till the core temperature reaches at least 75 degrees C," the spokesman said. More information on the [healthy tips for enjoying poon Choi](#) can be found on the CHP website.

When consuming party food or hot pot in gatherings during the festive season, the public should consume thoroughly washed and cooked food. For shellfish, the shells should be well scrubbed and the internal organs removed before consumption. Never use raw eggs as a dipping sauce. Use different chopsticks to handle raw and cooked food to avoid cross-contamination. For more food safety tips, please visit the [webpage of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department's Centre for Food Safety](#).

For more details of the above infectious diseases, please visit the CHP's pages on [seasonal influenza](#), [severe respiratory disease associated with a novel infectious agent](#), [measles](#), [MERS](#), [dengue fever](#) and [food poisoning](#). Those planning to travel can also visit the [Travel Health Service's website](#) for the latest travel health news and advice.