

Conditional free COVID-19 testing service continues for targeted groups

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) announced today (November 30) that the free COVID-19 testing service will continue to be provided for eligible persons of targeted groups at community testing centres (CTCs).

In view of the ongoing severe situation of COVID-19 infection around the world and the higher transmissibility of mutant strains which has a much faster rate of spread, the Government has been implementing the large-scale COVID-19 testing for groups of different risks, such that effective measures can be taken against the cases immediately to cut off transmission chains as quickly as possible. The testing of all targeted group persons (whether they have completed a vaccination course or not) must be done by using combined nasal and throat swabs collected by professionals, and the arrangement is applicable to all full-time and part-time staff of relevant industries.

To complement the dynamic "zero infection" strategy, the Government has taken a more stringent anti-epidemic measure since October and has fully implemented by phases the enhanced testing arrangement for high-risk and high-exposure groups, who are now required to undergo more frequent regular virus testing, i.e. to get tested on a daily basis (those who have not yet completed a vaccination course) or every three days (those who have completed a vaccination course). The Government will also make arrangements soon for those in groups of very high exposure risks to undergo testing every two days. These targeted groups include airport staff of targeted groups, working staff of quarantine centres/hotels, designated quarantine hotels (DQHs)/facilities (DQFs) and relevant designated transport, designated staff of container terminals and shipping services, working staff of CTCs and mobile specimen collection stations, and designated cold store practitioners.

Relevant bureaux/departments are also following up on the testing arrangement of frontline staff working at land boundary control points. Details will be announced later. Furthermore, in accordance with the latest anti-epidemic measures announced by the Education Bureau, the testing requirement for school staff who have not yet taken the first dose of vaccine has been tightened since November 25. Eligible school staff can undergo free testing every seven days at CTCs.

Persons of targeted groups eligible for receiving free COVID-19 testing at the CTCs are mainly those who are vaccinated or those who are unfit for vaccination because of health reasons. They must present valid medical certificates/vaccination records/documents of identity proof (Note) for receiving free tests. This requirement is applicable to all targeted groups. In other words, persons of targeted groups will need to pay for the regular testing service if they do not fall under the category of being unfit for vaccination because of health reasons.

The specific requirements for eligible persons of various targeted groups (including testing frequency, specimen requirement, conditions for receiving free test) are set out in the Annex. They have to make bookings online (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en) for receiving the free testing service at the CTCs. Those who have no appointment or do not meet the eligibility/conditions will need to pay for the testing service at \$240. The free testing arrangement will be available until the end of December.

Persons eligible for booking a free test every day (For fully vaccinated persons: every three days)

- Working staff of quarantine centres/hotels, DQHs/DQFs and relevant designated transport
- Designated staff of container terminals and shipping services
- Designated cold store practitioners
- Working staff of CTCs and mobile specimen collection stations

Persons eligible for booking a free test every three days

- Airport staff of targeted groups
- Airport staff not under targeted groups (For fully vaccinated persons: every 14 days)

Persons eligible for booking a free test every seven days

- Staff of catering businesses and bars/pubs
- Staff of re-opened scheduled premises
- Practitioners working at Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (SSSH)
- School staff

Persons eligible for booking a free test every 14 days

- Staff of designated scheduled premises and public and private swimming pools/beaches, and performers not wearing a mask in places of public entertainment and event premises (For staff of individual premises operating under certain modes or capacities: every seven days)
- Construction site personnel

Other persons eligible for booking a free test

- Working staff accompanying and receiving local group tours (To undergo one test within seven days before the tour, and no more than one free test every seven days)
- Staff members of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing homes who are fully vaccinated can continue to receive a free test every seven days on a voluntary basis to safeguard their health and that of their families and co-workers
- Personnel working in markets, licensed hawkers and fully vaccinated practitioners working at SSSH can continue to receive a free test every 28 days on a voluntary basis to safeguard their health and that of their families and co-workers

The Government regularly reviews the coverage and frequency of targeted group testing and if such testing should be publicly funded based on the latest epidemic risk assessment. A spokesman for the FHB said that the provision of free tests for targeted groups involves the use of public resources. Given that the Government must uphold the principle of effective use of resources, public money should only be used to subsidise individual eligible persons for taking nucleic acid tests in very exceptional situations.

The spokesman reiterated that the two vaccines currently recognised in Hong Kong are safe and effective, giving protection to the vaccinated persons and those around them. The vaccines have been received by billions of people worldwide and getting vaccination is the best way to fight the virus. Except for those with contraindications, most people are fit for vaccination. Currently, all Hong Kong residents aged 12 or above are eligible for receiving free vaccination. The Government calls on the public to treasure the vaccine supply in Hong Kong and get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Note:

- (i) Persons who are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination because of health reasons are required to present a relevant medical certificate;
- (ii) persons who are vaccinated (i.e. have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, or received the second dose but not yet passed 14 days, or completed a vaccination course of two doses) should present a relevant vaccination record (such as by downloading their electronic vaccination records or saving the printouts of their vaccination records to their mobile phones, or bringing along the printouts or copies of their vaccination records); and
- (iii) certain groups should also present card/letter/document proof issued by relevant organisations for verification of identity.