

Conditional free COVID-19 testing service continues for targeted groups

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) announced today (December 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, particularly the latest Omicron mutant strain continuing to spread rapidly around the world, the Government will continue to implement 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 further guard against the risk of importation of cases, the Government has further stepped up the testing arrangement for groups of very high exposure risks since December 15. Airport staff of targeted groups of very high exposure risks (i.e. those working in Orange Zone handling flights to/from places outside the Mainland) are now required to get tested every two days, while working staff of quarantine centres/hotels, designated quarantine hotels (DQHs)/facilities (DQFs) and relevant designated transport need to get tested on a daily basis (those who have not yet completed a vaccination course) or every two days (those who have completed a vaccination course).

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 will be further tightened since next January. Eligible school staff can undergo free testing every three days at CTCs.

Persons of targeted groups eligible for receiving free COVID-19 testing at 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 (see Notes) 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. Moreover, CTCs also provide free voluntary testing service for the following groups to safeguard their health and that of their families and co-workers, namely staff members of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons

with disabilities and nursing homes who are fully vaccinated (can receive a free test every seven days on a voluntary basis) and personnel working in markets, licensed hawkers and fully vaccinated practitioners working at Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (can receive a free test every 28 days on a voluntary basis).

Persons of targeted groups have to make bookings online (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en) for receiving the free testing service at CTCs. Those who have no appointment or do not meet the eligibility/conditions will need to pay for the testing service at a cost of \$240. The free testing arrangement will be available until the end of next January.

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.

Notes:

- (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 have 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.