

Conditional free COVID-19 testing service continues for targeted groups at community testing centres

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) announced today (September 30) that in the face of the threat posed by mutant strains and as a preparation for the fifth wave of epidemic, the Government will continue to require staff of targeted groups to receive vaccination as soon as possible while at the same time strengthen the testing arrangements for staff who have yet to complete a vaccination course. Only in very exceptional situations can an individual staff member postpone his or her vaccination, e.g. if he or she is unfit to receive vaccination at the moment because of health reasons, but the staff will be subject to undergo more frequent testing. In view of the Government's earlier announcement that deep throat saliva specimen will no longer be accepted for compulsory or regular testing, 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.

Free COVID-19 testing at community testing centres (CTCs) is provided only to individual eligible persons of targeted groups. Eligible persons are mainly those who have yet to complete a COVID-19 vaccination course 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 free testing service at the CTCs. Those who have no appointment or not meeting the eligibility/conditions will need to pay for the testing service at \$240. The free testing arrangement will be available until end of October.

In accordance with the latest anti-epidemic measures of the Airport Authority Hong Kong, certain groups need to undergo more frequent testing. The testing requirement has been tightened for airport staff who are not under the targeted groups. Those staff who are not fully vaccinated are required to undergo testing every three days.

Persons eligible for booking a free test every three days

- Staff of quarantine hotels and specified hotels (fully vaccinated persons: every seven days)
- Staff of designated transport to designated quarantine hotels (fully vaccinated persons: every seven days)

- Airport staff not under targeted groups (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
- Airport staff of targeted groups
- Practitioners working at Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (SSSH)

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 (staff of individual premises operating under certain modes or capacities: every seven days)
- Construction site personnel
- School staff

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)
- Practitioners working at SSSH and 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

A spokesman for the FHB said, "In the light of continuous detection of multiple cases involving the L452R mutant strain in Hong Kong, and taking into account the high transmissibility of mutant strains, we consider it necessary to extend the relevant testing arrangements, such that we can take effective measures against the cases immediately to cut off transmission chains as quickly as possible."

The Government regularly reviews whether relevant targeted groups should undergo regular testing and if such testing should be publicly funded based on the latest epidemic risk assessment.

"Since the implementation of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme in late February, there has been ample time for persons of targeted groups to receive vaccination. 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 said.

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 have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine or those who have received the second dose but not yet passed 14 days should present 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.