

DH appeals for heightened vigilance against winter respiratory tract infection

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (November 24) urged members of the public to heighten their vigilance against respiratory tract infection in winter. With the weather becoming cool, the CHP noted an increased activity in some respiratory pathogens other than influenza virus. The CHP reminds persons with respiratory symptoms, even if mild, to wear a surgical mask, refrain from work or attending classes at school, and seek medical advice promptly with a view to lowering the risk of transmission.

The CHP has been closely monitoring the local activity of respiratory pathogens in the community. Although the latest surveillance data showed local seasonal influenza activity continued to decrease, laboratory data from respiratory specimens from community and hospitals showed a change in the detection rates of different respiratory pathogens. As at the week ending November 18, the percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for parainfluenza viruses has increased from about 1 per cent in early September to about 5 per cent and that for adenovirus increased from about 2 per cent to about 4 per cent. On the other hand, the percentage for respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) decreased from about 9 per cent in early September to about 1 per cent, whereas that of other respiratory pathogens remained relatively stable.

A spokesman for the CHP said, "The changes in respiratory pathogens are seasonal in nature. Parainfluenza viruses and adenovirus are respiratory viruses mainly affect young children with potential of outbreak in school setting. The CHP has recorded sporadic school outbreaks involving parainfluenza viruses and Mycoplasma pneumoniae recently. The CHP has issued a letter to schools reminding them to stay vigilant and adopt appropriate preventive measures to mitigate the risk of respiratory infection outbreak in winter."

Separately, the Hospital Authority (HA) has implemented a series of measures to cope with the potential increase in patients with respiratory diseases and the associated demand surge in paediatric beds, including increasing the alertness among healthcare workers in Accidental & Emergency and General Outpatient Clinics, and wider provision of comprehensive respiratory panel testing to paediatric patients to facilitate bed turnover. The HA has also put in place a contingency plan which covers the activation of adult bed use for older paediatric patients, conversion of adult wards to paediatric wards, using Emergency Medicine beds for paediatric patients and considering inter-cluster transfer and extension of support by the Hong Kong Children Hospital when situation warrants.

As many respiratory pathogens including influenza virus may have

increasing activity and community transmission during winter, while vaccination is safe and effective in preventing seasonal influenza and COVID-19, The CHP strongly urge members of the public especially young children, elderly persons and those with chronic illnesses to get vaccinated as soon as possible. The Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Subsidy Scheme, the Government Vaccination Programme, Seasonal Influenza Vaccination School Outreach (Free of Charge) Programme and the Residential Care Home Vaccination Programme for the 2023/24 season have been launched. As it takes about two weeks to develop antibodies, with the arrival of the coming Christmas and New Year holidays, members of the public planning to travel outside Hong Kong are reminded to take heed of the situation in their destinations and receive influenza vaccination at appropriate times for enhanced personal protection.

Meanwhile, the CHP noted recent increase in respiratory infections amongst children in northern Mainland. According to the latest communication from the World Health Organization (WHO), Mainland has enhanced surveillance on respiratory infections, with causative agents identified include *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*, RSV, adenovirus and influenza virus while no novel pathogen has been identified by the mainland health authorities. The CHP will continue to monitor the situation and maintain close communication with the WHO and relevant authorities of the Mainland.

"To prevent respiratory infections, members of the public should observe strict personal, hand and environmental hygiene at all times. Persons with respiratory symptoms, even if the symptoms are mild, should wear a surgical mask, refrain from work or attending classes at school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly. They should perform hand hygiene before wearing and after removing a mask," the spokesman stressed.

For the latest information, please visit the CHP's [influenza page](#) and weekly [COVID-19 & Flu Express](#). As for vaccination, the public may visit the CHP's [Vaccination Schemes page](#).