

[DH participates in WHO's IHR Exercise Crystal 2024 to enhance public health emergency preparedness and response systems \(with photo\)](#)

The Department of Health (DH), yesterday (November 13), participated in the annual International Health Regulations (IHR) Exercise Crystal organised by the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Regional Office for the Western Pacific (WPRO) to enhance public health emergency preparedness and response systems. The IHR Exercise Crystal 2024 simulated an outbreak of a vector-borne disease to enable participants to complete the triggering tasks in response to the evolving scenario. The WHO also arranged a debriefing and experience-sharing session. Representatives of the Environment and Ecology Bureau (EEB) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) also joined the exercise.

The IHR Exercise Crystal is an annual exercise conducted by the WPRO virtually through video conference and other communication tools to test the communication mechanism of IHR focal points encompassing public health event reporting, verification, notification, communication and risk assessment, etc. Being one of the IHR focal points, the Centre for Health Protection of the DH has been participating in IHR Exercise Crystal for years.

The exercise simulated the occurrence of a vector-borne disease locally which is uncommon in the Western Pacific region. This infectious disease has symptoms similar to those of dengue fever (DF) and Zika virus infection. The Exercise tested the responses of each unit, which covered soliciting key information from the WHO and relevant contact points to facilitate immediate risk assessment, reporting to the WHO upon emergence of relevant local cases, notifying other countries on the latest local situation, assessment on cross-border spreading of the disease, etc. Representatives of the DH, the EEB and the FEHD discussed and co-ordinated the cross-sectoral response required in the simulated scenario, and reported to the WHO. Representatives from Hong Kong also shared their experiences with the host of the WPRO and other participants during the debriefing and experience-sharing session.

Vector-borne disease is transmitted by vector organisms, for example, arthropods including mosquitoes, lice and mites. DF, malaria and Zika virus infection are common examples of vector-borne diseases in Hong Kong and neighbouring areas. Preventive measures include avoiding bites by vector organisms and pest control measures. The Government has an interdepartmental co-ordination mechanism in place, such as regularly reviewing the effectiveness of the pest control measures through the Pest Control Steering Committee, and formulating comprehensive contingency plans in response to some vector-borne diseases that pose public health threats, to ensure timely responses to relevant diseases that might emerge in Hong Kong.

A spokesman for the DH said, "As climate change becomes drastic, vector-borne diseases have brought huge public health threats globally. The exercise provides an opportunity to strengthen the communications with the WHO, and tests the cross-sectoral co-ordination mechanism against vector-borne disease in the local setting. We will consolidate the experience gained from this exercise and further strengthen the co-ordination with the WHO and other government departments."

