

Enhancing testing capabilities to tie in with strengthening of anti-epidemic measures

The Government has been refining its anti-epidemic strategies in accordance with the development of the epidemic, including following the three key principles of "compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis" to conduct large-scale COVID-19 testing for groups of different risks with a view to achieving "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", and cutting the transmission chains in the community as far as possible. Having regard to the recent higher risk of transmission and infection in different premises or groups and the strengthened anti-epidemic measures for the resumption of various economic and social activities, the Government encourages or requires people of various groups to undergo testing, and is further enhancing the supply of testing services to cope with the increasing demand for testing in order to meet anti-epidemic goals and make it as convenient as possible for the public.

The Government has all along been providing convenient testing services to the public through various channels, including free testing service. For details, please refer to www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/early-testing.html.

(1) The Government provides the public with free testing service through private doctors. Individual persons with symptoms should seek medical advice from doctors promptly. Other than the accident and emergency departments of public hospitals and general outpatient clinics, persons with symptoms may visit private clinics and hospitals and undergo testing as instructed by medical professionals in order to receive an early and appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

(2) People who feel they have a higher risk of exposure or are experiencing mild discomfort can obtain deep throat saliva specimen collection packs from any of the 47 designated general outpatient clinics of the Hospital Authority (HA), 121 post offices and 20 MTR stations. After obtaining deep throat saliva specimens as per instructions, they shall return the specimens to any of the 47 designated general outpatient clinics of the HA, 13 designated clinics of the Department of Health or designated specimen collection points at 23 government premises.

(3) The 19 community testing centres across the territory provide self-paid testing services to the public for general community or private purposes (such as certification for travelling or work); and free testing services for persons subject to compulsory testing or target groups requiring testing. In accordance with the epidemic situation and the testing need, the Government also sets up mobile specimen collection stations from time to time at different locations to provide testing services to those subject to compulsory testing or target groups.

In the wake of recent clusters of infection or higher risk of transmission at different premises, the Government provides free testing services at community testing centres with online bookings to various target groups such as foreign domestic helpers, construction site workers, and security and guarding personnel. To tie in with the reopening or relaxation of restrictions of restaurants and multiple scheduled premises (including (i) sports premises (including indoor and outdoor venues); (ii) fitness centres; (iii) beauty parlour and massage establishments; (iv) places of public entertainment (performance venues, theme parks, museums, public exhibitions, cinemas, family amusement centres, etc); (v) places of amusement (billiard establishments, public bowling-alleys and public skating rinks); and (vi) amusement game centres), schools, etc, there is a need to step up anti-epidemic measures, including requiring their staff to undergo testing. The Government also provides free testing services with online bookings to these target groups at community testing centres, and they may also continue to undergo testing via the above free testing means. Those with symptoms shall seek medical advice promptly and undergo testing as instructed by medical professionals, and they ought not visit the community testing centres.

The Government encourages persons of target groups to actively undergo free testing to safeguard the health of themselves, family members, colleagues and the public. Those who choose to undergo testing at the community testing centres must register through the community testing centre booking system (www.communitytest.gov.hk) for free testing service. Those without bookings will need to pay the testing fee of \$240. The community testing centre booking system will show the booking status of centres for the coming week, and relevant persons can choose suitable time slots for testing. If necessary, target groups who underwent testing may make another booking.

The Government reiterates that, for those scheduled premises which will reopen on the seventh day of Lunar New Year and those restaurants which will resume dine-in dinner service on the same date, the operators are only required to arrange their staff to undergo the first testing from February 11 to 24, and arrange another test for them every 14 days. In other words, the operators can arrange the staff to receive the test on any dates within the first 14-day period, and there is no need to rush for test completion by February 18. For those who were unable to make a booking for testing at the community testing centres, they may go to the aforesaid locations to obtain deep throat saliva specimen collection packs for free testing. In general, the test result is available through SMS within 24 to 48 hours from the time of returning the specimen.

Since last July, the local COVID-19 testing capacity has been increased substantially. In January 2021, a daily average of around 41 000 virus tests were conducted by the Government, equivalent to 3.5 times the testing volume last July during the third wave of the epidemic (a daily average of around 12 000 tests). During the Lunar New Year holidays (first to third day of the Lunar New Year), the Government continued to carry out testing work, with a daily average of more than 45 000 virus tests conducted.

Starting from the end of last year, over 40 000 saliva specimen collection packs can be distributed at general outpatient clinics, post

offices and MTR stations each day. In view of the surge in demand, the Government will increase the distribution quantity to over 50 000 shortly, and monitor closely the utilisation to make necessary adjustment. Furthermore, the booking quota of all community testing centres has been increased to 26 000 or above, and more manpower has been deployed to serve the public. The Government is also working with operators to increase the number of mobile testing stations in a bid to divert the demand of different sectors. For details, please refer to the Annex. Members of the public who will visit the community testing centres should make an online booking in advance so as to minimise the queueing time.