

# Government amends the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation and extends social distancing measures

The Government today (August 25) gazetted amendments to the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) to expressly provide that engaging in any strenuous physical activity, including sports activity, in public places (except indoor areas) would be a reasonable excuse for not wearing a mask. The relevant amendment will take effect from August 28.

In the meantime, the Government has been closely monitoring the latest development of the epidemic situation in Hong Kong and has decided to, unless the epidemic situation takes a sudden downturn, issue the new directions and specifications before this Friday to relax social distancing measures in a gradual and orderly manner. These directions and specifications would take effect from 0.00am August 28, 2020. The social distancing measures under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) currently in place (see press release issued on August 17) will be extended until August 27.

## Latest Epidemic Development

As the Government previously pointed out, the development of the epidemic situation this week is of high significance. On one hand, the Government is closely monitoring whether the downward trend in the number of confirmed cases would be sustained; on the other hand, relevant departments are actively undertaking the testing and follow-up work for infection clusters.

Regarding the clusters involving the container terminal, the Transport and Housing Bureau (THB) has been closely communicating with the terminal operators to ensure that the infection area is kept under control and that the terminal operation would not be disrupted as far as possible. Until the morning on August 24, the terminal operators have returned over 90% of the distributed bottles with specimens collected to the Department of Health (DH) for testing. Last week, the THB and the DH held a meeting with the terminal operators to urge them to adopt suitable measures to reduce the risks of virus infection. The terminal operators have implemented a series of improvement measures, including installing additional modular units as resting areas, limiting the number of beds in each area and putting up partitions between beds to provide adequate space for social distancing among

workers. Besides, the Government will also provide regular virus tests for frontline terminal staff (including those who are required to work on vessels) with higher risks by job nature in order to ensure the health of staff members as well as to maintain the continued and smooth operation of the container terminal and hence steady cargo supplies.

Regarding the clusters involving foreign domestic helper (FDH) dormitories, in response to recent confirmed infection cases of FDHs who had stayed in boarding facilities, some of which not being operated by employment agencies, the Government has decided to expand the scope of the testing service to cover FDHs whose previous employment contracts have expired or have been terminated and those who are waiting to join the new employers' family. These FDHs are most likely to be staying in boarding facilities while waiting to change employers. Starting from August 24, eligible FDHs may make an appointment through a registration hotline to receive free testing service on or after August 25. Furthermore, to reduce as far as possible the number of FDHs and their length of stay in boarding facilities, the Immigration Department (ImmD) is working at full steam to speed up the processing of work visa applications submitted by those FDHs who are in Hong Kong, especially the applications from those whose employment contracts expire normally. The processing time for the applications concerned has been reduced from between four and six weeks to between one and two weeks only at present. To combat abuse in changing employers through premature contract termination arrangements (commonly known as "job-hopping"), the ImmD will closely scrutinise the case details such as the number and reasons for premature contract termination in the last 12 months in assessing FDHs' applications for employment. For suspected "job-hopping" cases, the ImmD will refuse their applications for changing a new employer and require them to leave Hong Kong.

The Government has also been expanding the testing arrangements for target groups to enable the Government to better grasp the situation of the spread of virus in the community in order to provide a basis for implementation of various measures. The Government has started to provide free and one-off tests for groups with higher-risks on a voluntary basis in phases since mid-July. The estimated number of individuals covered is around 1 million. Currently, the target groups covered include staff members of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) and nursing homes; staff of boarding section of special schools; drivers of public transport; restaurant staff; market tenants/ workers; licensed hawkers; slaughterhouse workers; staff of property management sector; residents of public housing estates or private residential buildings where confirmed cases are found; FDHs who are living in the dormitories provided by employment agents; pregnant women; frontline staff of the Hongkong Post; as well as mobile fishermen and deckhands. As at August 24, more than 385 000 specimens from these target groups have been submitted for testing. Among them, 80 specimens (about 0.02% of specimens tested) were tested positive. The Government will continue to expand the voluntary Targeted Group Testing Scheme (TGTS) and conduct repeated testing for target groups with genuine need. It should be noted that the Government identified three confirmed cases among staff members of the Hong Chi Lei Muk Shue Hostel through the TGTS. After further testing, five residents were

tested preliminary positive and admitted to hospital for treatment. In the evening on August 24, the other 33 residents were conveyed to the RCHEs/RCHDs quarantine facility established at the AsiaWorld-Expo while another three residents, accompanied by their families, have been transferred to the quarantine facility at Penny's Bay.

The Government will also introduce the Universal Community Testing Programme to provide one-off virus testing services free-of-charge to all Hong Kong citizens who may join on a voluntary basis. The programme will commence on September 1 and run for a period between 7 to 14 days. The Government is in the process of finalising the details and will announce the details as soon as possible.

According to the World Health Organization and health experts, COVID-19 cannot be eradicated without effective treatment and vaccination. The virus will co-exist with us for quite a long period of time and even become seasonally endemic. The Government is thus required to incorporate work in relation to disease prevention and control as well as infection management, in addition to the resumption of various social and economic activities and normal daily activities of members of the public, into the new normal of the daily operation of society and Government measures. To this end, the Government has all along adopted the "suppress and lift" strategy in order to quickly adjust epidemic control measures having regard to the development of the epidemic situation. Experts have also suggested that a winter surge or a fourth wave coinciding with the usual influenza season is possible, and Hong Kong should get itself well prepared for that wave in all aspects. Nevertheless as pointed out repeatedly by the Government, under the "new normal", it is not realistic to expect zero confirmed cases in the community for a long period and the public must accept that there would be isolated cases and clusters in the community from time to time. As such, under the "new normal", the Government should not wait until there is no confirmed case in the community for an extended period of time before considering relaxation of social distancing measures in a gradual and orderly manner. On the contrary, when the epidemic situation is under control, the Government will relax social distancing measures in a refined and sophisticated approach in a gradual and orderly manner, so as to allow those social and economic activities which are necessary in daily lives and of which the infection risks can be considerably reduced through enhanced prevention and control measures. The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and review the various measures in place from time to time with a view to making suitable adjustments taking into account all relevant factors.

### Social Distancing Measures

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As such, the Government will allow social and economic activities to resume in a gradual and orderly manner under the new normal having regard to the latest development of the epidemic situation and risk assessment. The first phase of relaxation would include re-opening of indoor premises for passive activities where the risk is relatively easy to manage as well as outdoor sports premises for activities involving little physical contact. The

Government will, unless the epidemic situation takes a sudden downturn, issue the latest directions and specifications before this Friday to relax the social distancing measures for the aforementioned premises in a gradual and orderly manner starting from that day include:

(1) Extend the hours of dine-in services for catering businesses to 9pm and maintain other infection control measures, including the requirements that tables must be arranged in a way to ensure there is a distance of at least 1.5 metres or some form of partition; the number of customers must not exceed 50 per cent of the normal seating capacity of the premises; and no more than two persons may be seated together at one table.

(2) re-open the following scheduled premises:

(a) Cinema, with measures including the requirements that tickets to be sold and seats to be occupied of each house for film screening must not exceed 50 per cent of the seating capacity of the house; seating must be arranged in a way that no more than two consecutive seats in the same row may be occupied; no eating or drinking inside a house; as well as cleaning and disinfection of each house must be conducted after each screening.

(b) Beauty parlour, with measures including the requirements that all staff must wear protective gears such as mask and face shield/goggles all the time and the protective gears have to be changed or sanitised after service is provided to a customer; the beauty parlour may only serve customers upon appointment; as well as no more than two persons may be allowed in each partitioned service area during the provision of beauty services.

(c) Some outdoor sports premises for activities involving little physical contact, namely athletic tracks in sports grounds; tennis and practice courts; golf courses; driving ranges and practice greens; bowling greens; shooting ranges; archery ranges; cycling parks; horse riding schools as well as radio-controlled model aircraft flying fields.

(3) Allow people not to wear masks in country parks.

The Government has maintained close liaison with various trades and industries to listen to their suggestions on prevention and control measures to be adopted. The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation, and allow gradual resumption of normal daily lives of members of the public under the new normal, while striking a balance among disease prevention and control, economic needs and level of acceptance of the society.

### Mask Wearing Requirements

Wearing of masks by members of the public is integral to the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 in the community. Currently, the Secretary of Food and Health has made specifications under the Cap. 599I to the effect that wearing of a mask is required for any person who is boarding or on board a public transport carrier, is entering or present in an MTR paid area, or is

entering or present in public place (indoor and outdoor). The requirement does not apply to persons who are under the age of two, persons who have lawful authority or reasonable excuse for not wearing a mask.

The spokesman said, "In the past month, we have been encouraging members of the public to stay at home and maintain social distance to contain the spread of the third wave of the epidemic. The Government understands that the public has started to be fatigued by the anti-epidemic measures and hope to engage in outdoor activities. In fact, the risk of infection of exercising in outdoor areas (compared to indoor places) is lower. Such exercises can also help maintain physical and mental health so that the public will be fit to continue to combat the epidemic. Currently, performing strenuous physical activities in public outdoor places is not a reasonable excuse for not wearing masks. We understand that many members of the public have shied away from exercising as they cannot wear masks to do exercise outdoor during the hot summer. Taking into account the above factor, the Government amended the relevant legislation to provide that engaging in any strenuous physical activity in public places (except indoor areas) would be a reasonable excuse for not wearing a mask, to encourage members of the public to engage in physical activities.

"We hope to highlight that it has been over a month since the third wave of the epidemic started but it is not yet over. At this stage, we need the cooperation of members of the public in order to bring the epidemic under control so that social and economic activities can resume gradually. To this end, we appeal to members of the public to wear surgical masks in public places, especially when they are onboard a public transport carrier or staying in crowded places. They should also stay vigilant and maintain personal and environmental hygiene in order to prevent rebound of the epidemic."