

# Government announces arrangements for persons pending admission to hospitals or isolation facilities

The Government announced today (February 15) that it has made appropriate arrangements for citizens who are pending admission to hospitals or isolation facilities, including those who test positive in COVID-19 nucleic acid tests, during the waiting period, with a view to allaying relevant citizens' concerns, focusing resources in the medical system for handling more urgent cases to protect citizens' lives and public health, and seizing time for further enhancing the handling capacities in hospitals and isolation facilities.

The recent epidemic situation in Hong Kong has been very severe. Despite a significant increase in handling capacities on various fronts earlier, the fifth wave involves the Omicron mutant strain with an extreme transmission speed. A tsunami of new cases has far exceeded the enhanced capacities of Hong Kong on various fronts including testing, tracing, quarantine, isolation and treatment. Hospital Accident and Emergency Departments, wards and community treatment facilities under the Hospital Authority (HA) are facing immense pressure, and cannot admit all cases tested preliminarily positive or confirmed for COVID-19. It is necessary to prioritise the handling and care of patients with higher risks and more serious conditions. At the same time, community isolation facilities of the Government are not yet adequate to enable immediate transfer of all persons with no or mild symptoms from home to these isolation facilities for centralised isolation. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government is striving to further enhance its handling capacities by making the best use of the support rendered by the Central Government, including significantly increasing community isolation and treatment facilities with a view to isolating and treating confirmed cases as early as possible.

During the period before the aforementioned handling capacities are adequately increased, the Government understands that citizens who are pending admission will feel anxious. The following arrangements aim to offer guidelines to relevant citizens and allay their concerns.

When citizens test positive/preliminarily positive upon COVID-19 nucleic acid testing at community testing centres/mobile specimen collection stations (hereinafter referred to as "infected persons"), relevant cases will be added in the COVID-19 Admission Allocation System. However, as hospitals cannot admit all cases at present, the handling of individuals with higher risks or serious conditions will thus take priority in view of patients' welfare. The HA will conduct risk assessments based on the information available in the system, and transfer those patients in need to hospitals and other infected persons to community isolation facilities in an orderly manner.

Infected persons with no or mild symptoms should stay calm while waiting for admission. They should continue to monitor their physical conditions, and there is no need to panic. Although overseas experience shows that most adults infected with the Omicron mutant strain develop milder symptoms than those with the Delta mutant strain, the elderly, chronic patients and children may still develop more severe symptoms and complications. COVID-19 vaccines can reduce the possibility of hospitalisation and serious infections, and are crucial in the lowering of severe cases or even deaths.

As infected persons may need to wait for a longer time before admission can be arranged, they should take personal protective measures by performing hand hygiene regularly and observing cough manners to reduce the risk of virus transmission as far as practicable during the period. If household conditions are permissible, infected persons should stay in their own room and close the door, and avoid face-to-face contact, dining and sharing personal items with other household members. They should wear well-fitted surgical masks properly whenever they leave the room.

As for environmental hygiene, it is recommended to keep the place well ventilated by keeping windows open as far as feasible. Daily cleaning of the household environment with disinfection using 1 in 49 diluted household bleach should be conducted. If toilets are shared, cleaning and disinfection should be done immediately after every use. About half a litre of water should be poured in each floor drain outlet at least once per week.

Infected persons should make every effort to stay home and avoid going out when they are waiting for admission. If going out is strictly necessary (e.g. for seeking medical attention), they should take personal protective measures and use point-to-point transport as much as possible.

The Government understands that certain infected persons may develop symptoms while waiting for admission. To cater for the medical needs of these persons, the HA established a hotline yesterday afternoon (February 14) to address enquiries for persons in need and offer medical advice. The HA has also prepared to launch designated clinics in phases to assist in the handling of infected persons with milder conditions, so that they may receive appropriate diagnosis and treatment. The HA will issue a press release later today to outline the designated clinics and other relevant arrangements. The Government is exploring with the taxi industry on arranging designated automobiles for transporting these persons to designated clinics.

If infected persons develop severe symptoms (e.g. prolonged fever at 38 degrees Celsius or above, or signs such as shortness of breath, palpitations and chest pain), one should urgently call the 999 hotline for arranging ambulance transfer to hospital as early as possible.

Rapid antigen tests are designed to directly detect virus proteins in respiratory specimens. There are rapid test kits from different manufacturers currently available in the market. They are easy to use, and the results are usually available within 30 minutes. When using rapid test kits, please pay attention to and follow the instructions from the manufacturer to perform the

test and read the result properly. It is advisable to record the result by taking a photo immediately after reading the test. Citizens should wash their hands before and after performing the tests, and minimise non-essential items in the specimen collection area. While taking the respiratory specimen, they should observe personal and environmental hygiene and do so in a well-ventilated place. If collecting the specimen at a place in the absence of other persons is not possible, please keep a distance of at least 2 metres from other people. If the household environment is contaminated during the specimen collecting process, disinfection should be conducted with 1 in 49 diluted bleach solution. For metallic surfaces, 70 per cent alcohol can be used to disinfect the area.

Since rapid antigen testing can only serve as a reference, it cannot replace the nucleic acid testing that is at present the gold standard for diagnosis of COVID-19. If citizens test positive through using rapid test kits on their own, they should further undergo nucleic acid testing for confirmation. For the sake of prudence, they should take personal protective measures, stay home and avoid going out as far as practicable. They should invite relatives or friends to obtain and deliver deep throat saliva specimen collection packs through existing channels. If the result is still positive, the Department of Health and the HA will treat the case as tested positive/preliminarily positive under the aforementioned mechanism. Should these persons begin to develop symptoms before results are available, they may consult their family doctors for advice according to their needs. When the aforementioned severe symptoms are developed, members of the public are urged to call the 999 hotline for arranging ambulance transfer to hospital as early as possible.