

Government appeals for heightened vigilance against influenza and COVID-19

The Government today (January 4) said that, the local seasonal influenza and COVID-19 activities have shown a significant upward trend and a high-incidence period may occur within a short period of time. Members of the public are urged to heighten their vigilance, in particular to receive seasonal influenza vaccination (SIV) and COVID-19 vaccines in a timely manner, and to observe the proper use of surgical masks.

For seasonal influenza, according to the latest surveillance data (as at the week ending December 30 last year), the influenza admission rate in public hospitals (0.48 cases per 10 000 population) had been higher than the baseline level, while the percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for seasonal influenza viruses received by the Public Health Laboratory Services Branch (PHLSB) of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) and Hospital Authority was 8.49 per cent, representing an increase of more than double compared with three weeks ago. According to this trend, the seasonal influenza may enter a peak period next week.

Meanwhile, the overall activity of COVID-19 has also increased significantly. With regard to surveillance on variants, the proportion of JN.1 variant found in sewage samples (from about 15 per cent to about 26 per cent) and specimens from human COVID-19 cases (from about 20 per cent to about 60 per cent) both increased. The CHP anticipated that the JN.1 variant will most likely replace XBB as the dominant variant in Hong Kong.

The activity of the SARS-CoV-2 virus generally increases in winter. With the higher transmissibility of the JN.1 variant, although the current evidence does not suggest JN.1 will cause a more severe disease, more local COVID-19 cases are anticipated. With more community infections, reports on severe cases and deaths will also increase. For other respiratory pathogens, the overall activities of rhinovirus/enterovirus, adenovirus, parainfluenza viruses and Mycoplasma pneumoniae are decreasing, while human metapneumovirus has slightly increased.

A spokesman for the CHP said that vaccination is safe and effective for preventing seasonal influenza and COVID-19. As the protection conferred by the vaccines will wane over time, members of the public who have not received COVID-19 vaccines or SIV, in particular high-risk persons such as the elderly and residents at residential care homes (RCHs) for the elderly (RCHes) and RCHs for persons with disabilities (RCHDs), to get vaccinated as soon as possible before a period of high incidence of COVID-19 and influenza for self-protection.

Regarding COVID-19 vaccines, the vaccination rate of targeted groups

(such as the elderly and children) continued to be at a low level. As at December 31 last year, among young children aged 6 months to less than 3 years, only 30 per cent have received at least one dose of vaccine. For elderly aged over 80, only about 25 per cent received the fourth dose. The Government has started the first phase of XBB mRNA vaccination arrangement for those with higher risks (i.e. adult residents of RCHs and the elderly aged 65 or above), among which elderly aged 65 or above can make a booking through the Government online booking system at booking.covidvaccine.gov.hk/forms/index.jsp. If necessary, eligible persons can seek assistance for making online bookings from post offices (except mobile post offices). The Government will also continue to provide vaccination for adult residents at RCHes and RCHDs through outreach services under the Residential Care Home Vaccination Programme. For venues providing XBB mRNA vaccines, please visit: www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/xbb_venues_dec2023_eng.pdf. As of yesterday (January 3), the Government has administered a total of about 20 000 doses of XBB mRNA vaccines for eligible citizens.

Apart from that, since the launch of the 2023/24 season SIV programmes from September last year, a total of over 1.7 million doses of SIV have been administered so far, representing an increase of 21 per cent compared with the same period of last season. An obvious increase in SIV uptake this season for high-risk groups is observed, especially the elderly and children, when comparing with previous years. Vaccination at RCHes has covered over 80 per cent of the residents by arranging visiting doctor's outreach vaccination service, while the coverage rate of community elders increased by 15 per cent to the about 47 per cent currently. For children, through the concerted effort by stakeholders, the vaccination rate among children is now over 50 per cent.

The CHP strongly urged high-risk groups to receive SIV and COVID-19 booster as soon as possible. Regardless of the number of COVID-19 vaccines doses received previously, they should receive a booster dose to be given at least six months after the last dose or COVID-19 infection (whichever is later). For the sake of convenience, COVID-19 vaccine can be co-administered with SIV. Details of receiving both COVID-19 vaccination and SIV are available online (www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/106096.html).

Wearing a surgical mask properly could effectively prevent respiratory diseases transmitted through respiratory droplets. The CHP reminded high risk persons to wear a surgical mask when visiting public places, and the public should also wear a surgical mask when taking public transportation or staying at crowded places. Persons who are symptomatic, even if having mild symptoms, should 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 spreading the virus. For information on the proper use of masks, please visit the CHP's website (www.chp.gov.hk/en/healthtopics/content/460/19731.html).

The CHP will continue to closely monitor local and overseas situation of infectious diseases. For the latest information, please visit the CHP's [influenza page](#) and [COVID-19 & Flu Express](#). As for vaccination, the

public may visit the CHP's [Vaccination Schemes page](#) and [COVID-19 Vaccination Programme website](#).