

Government appeals for heightened vigilance against respiratory tract infection and vaccination at appropriate times for enhanced personal protection

The Government today (December 15) urged members of the public again to heighten their vigilance against respiratory tract infection in winter. With the weather becoming cool, an increased activity in some respiratory pathogens is expected. Members of the public, especially high-risk groups, should receive COVID-19 vaccines and seasonal influenza vaccination (SIV) at appropriate times for enhanced personal protection. Persons with respiratory symptoms, even if mild, are reminded to 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 transmission.

Speaking at a press conference today, the Controller of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH), Dr Edwin Tsui, said that with the approach of Christmas and New Year holidays, the chance for members of the public travelling outside Hong Kong increases. As the protection conferred by the vaccines will wane over time, Dr Tsui appealed to members of the public who have not received COVID-19 vaccines or SIV, in particular high-risk persons such as the elderly and residential care home (RCH) for the elderly (RCHE) residents, to get vaccinated as soon as possible for self-protection.

Regarding COVID-19 vaccines, the Government had procured a total of 200 000 doses of XBB mRNA vaccines (including Comirnaty Omicron XBB.1.5 30mcg/dose arrived in Hong Kong earlier and Spikevax XBB.1.5 0.1 mg/mL arrived last night (December 14)). Government staff had carried out stringent checking and inspection in accordance with established procedures to ensure that the vaccine complies with the product specifications and that the transportation process followed the relevant cold-chain requirements. The vaccines have been put in validated ultra-low temperature freezers to ensure its proper storage in accordance with the temperature specified by the drug manufacturer.

The Government has earlier announced the [latest COVID-19 vaccination arrangements](#) and those with higher risks, i.e. adult residents of RCHs and the elderly aged 65 or above, will be accorded priority to receive the XBB mRNA vaccines in the first phase. They can now 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). For venues providing XBB mRNA vaccines, please visit: www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/xbb_venues_dec2023_eng.pdf. According to

experts' views, all currently available COVID-19 vaccines in Hong Kong are effective in preventing severe disease. Details can be found on the CHP's [COVID-19 Vaccination Programme website](#).

The CHP has all along been closely monitoring the latest situation of respiratory infections in Hong Kong through monitoring laboratory specimens testing, hospital admission to public hospitals, disease outbreak reports, etc. For children, surveillance data in the past four weeks (as of December 9) revealed that the rhinovirus/enterovirus continues to have the highest activity level among the respiratory pathogens, accounting for over 30 per cent of the children respiratory specimens received by the Hospital Authority (HA), though the proportion in recent days has dropped. The next active pathogens are adenovirus and parainfluenza viruses (with the positive percentage of about 20 per cent each) and are on a rising trend. Meanwhile, according to the figures from the HA, the percentage of positive specimens for Mycoplasma pneumoniae infection in children in the past three months was about 3.5 per cent with the number of admission maintained at some 100 each month while the trend remains largely stable and has not reached the peak level in 2016 and 2019. On the other hand, the overall local seasonal influenza and COVID-19 activities continued to remain at a low level.

Dr Tsui said it is expected that respiratory infections will enter a period of high incidence in winter, and the latest surveillance data are in line with previous seasonal trends. As some of the abovementioned pathogens (including rhinovirus, parainfluenza viruses and Mycoplasma pneumoniae) are not vaccine-preventable, while members of the public strictly complied with social distancing and anti-epidemic measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, their immunity against respiratory pathogens apart from COVID-19 decreased. The CHP expected the activity of respiratory pathogens in winter will continue to increase, while that for seasonal influenza and COVID-19 will also increase in winter.

Apart from COVID-19 vaccines, the Government continue to launch SIV programmes. From September till now, a total of over 1.6 million doses of SIV have been administered so far in the 2023/24 season, representing an increase of 23 per cent comparing 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 RCHE has covered 74 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 current 44 per cent. For children, through the concerted effort by stakeholders, the vaccination rate among children is now 49 per cent, which has increased by 45 per cent compared to the same period last year.

Vaccination is safe and effective in preventing seasonal influenza and COVID-19. Considering more activities may be held in RCHs during the Lunar New Year, it is necessary for the Government to keep driving up the vaccination rate of residents of RCHE and RCHs for people with disabilities for enhanced protection. A new round of outreach vaccination service special programme for RCHs was rolled out yesterday to provide vaccination for residents who are due to get vaccinated as soon as possible. Same as the

previous arrangement, medical teams will visit RCHs at least once a week to provide outreach vaccination service, with a view to administering COVID-19 vaccines to every resident who is due to get vaccinated (especially for additional booster). In addition, medical teams will also provide SIV concurrently for residents who have yet received to attain dual protection.

The DH strongly urged members of the public that high-risk groups should 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 convenience sake, 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).

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](#).