

Government enhances disease prevention and control measures with reference to WHO's advice

The World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General has declared that the outbreak of the novel coronavirus constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and made a number of recommendations on disease prevention and control. A government spokesman said today (January 31) that the Government's disease prevention and control measures implemented so far are in line with the WHO's suggestions. Taking into account the WHO's recommendations, the Government has announced that measures will be extended or rolled out to further prevent and control the spread of the disease.

Extending class suspension and special work arrangements for government departments

To reduce the flow of people and contacts among them in the community, the Government earlier extended the Chinese New Year holidays of secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens, child care centres and special schools to February 27. Government departments have also made special work arrangements over the past week. Except for staff providing emergency services and essential public services, all other employees of the Government are not required to return to their offices but to work at home after the holidays. In light of the latest developments of the disease and the continued tight supply of surgical masks, the Government has announced the extension of the relevant measures. All secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens, child care centres and special schools will continue to suspend classes. The date of class resumption will be decided later, but it will not be before March 2. Special work arrangements for government departments will be extended until February 9 and the Government will review the situation later. Taking into consideration the fact that the disease may persist for a period of time, other than providing emergency and essential public services, government departments have to provide basic and limited public services to members of the public starting from next week. On the details of class suspension arrangements and the provision of public services, the Education Bureau and individual government departments will make announcements as soon as possible. The Government appeals to employers to continue to make flexible work arrangements for employees in accordance with their operational needs.

Hong Kong residents returning from the Mainland

To reduce the risk of spread of the disease in the community, all Hong Kong residents who have visited Hubei Province in the past 14 days should approach staff of the Department of Health's Port Health Division for relevant assessment upon their arrival. Even those who are asymptomatic will be arranged to stay in quarantine centres for surveillance. The Government

also appeals to Hong Kong residents returning from other places on the Mainland to stay home for 14 days upon their return as far as the circumstances permit. Those who need to go out should wear a surgical mask for 14 days upon their return.

Hubei residents in Hong Kong

Hubei residents have been restricted from entering Hong Kong since January 27. For those Hubei residents who have already entered Hong Kong, they are only allowed to stay in Hong Kong for seven days in general, and it is believed that the number of these people in Hong Kong will gradually decrease. As at 1pm today, the Immigration Department had conducted inspections at 355 hotels and guesthouses and found 48 travellers from Hubei. Fifteen of them have left Hong Kong on their own while the Department of Health will arrange for the remaining travellers concerned to stay in quarantine centres or, for asymptomatic travellers, to leave Hong Kong as soon as possible.

Enhancing exit screening and health declaration

Making reference to the WHO's recommendations, the Government will enhance exit screening to facilitate early identification of passengers with symptoms. Starting from tomorrow (February 1), Hong Kong International Airport will implement body temperature checks for both departing and transit passengers. No boarding will be allowed for passengers with fever. On land-based control points, the Government will impose a requirement for health declaration at Lo Wu Control Point and the Shenzhen Bay Port tomorrow and extend it to other control points gradually.

All-out efforts to support front-line healthcare staff

The Government will continue to fully support front-line healthcare staff. Although the supply of surgical masks remains tight, the Government will give priority to their needs. Starting from tomorrow, the seven hospital clusters of the Hospital Authority will have the capability to conduct rapid virus testing, which can help relieve the work pressure of healthcare staff.

Increasing supply of surgical masks through a multi-pronged approach

The Government will continue to spare no effort in sourcing globally, increasing local production, liaising with mask suppliers in the Mainland and seeking assistance from relevant authorities to help supplies reach Hong Kong, with a view to meeting the needs of healthcare workers and other personnel providing services to the public, as well as stabilising the market supply. The Government also appeals to private and charitable organisations to donate surgical masks to the underprivileged, and will play a facilitation role with financial resources and co-ordination.

The Government is also closely monitoring the effectiveness of the various measures implemented earlier:

Reducing the flow of people between the Mainland and Hong Kong

Measures implemented earlier, including imposing restrictions on Hubei residents and those who have visited Hubei Province in the past 14 days from entering Hong Kong, the Mainland authorities suspending the issuance of endorsements under the Individual Visit Scheme as requested by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government and reducing transport and border control point services, have significantly reduced the number of Mainland visitors coming to Hong Kong. The number of Mainland visitors who arrived in Hong Kong via control points (except the airport) yesterday accounted for only 9.7 per cent of the total number of passengers, and the number has dropped 91 per cent compared to the figure two weeks ago. It is believed that the number will further decrease. The Government will continue to liaise with the Mainland as appropriate to explore further consolidation and tightening the management of the control points.

Quarantine centre facilities

To cope with future quarantine needs, the Government is preparing more quarantine centre facilities. If a large number of close contacts have to be quarantined within a short period of time, the Government may need to impose home isolation for the relevant persons. The Government has completed a study on the use of electronic tracking bracelets and positioning technology to help in surveillance. The relevant items will be available next week.

Assisting Hong Kong residents in Hubei

As of yesterday (January 30), the Government had received about 600 requests for assistance in relation to the novel coronavirus, involving about 1 300 Hong Kong people located in over 30 cities in Hubei Province. Officers of the Wuhan Economic and Trade Office will stay connected with these people and render assistance to them. At the same time, the Government will communicate with the Central Authorities on ways to arrange for them to return to Hong Kong in a practical manner.

The spokesman said that the current situation is critical. The Government is grateful to all front-line healthcare staff and other personnel participating in disease prevention and control for remaining steadfast at their posts, and urges all members of the public to join the Government and healthcare workers to do the best in disease prevention and control.