

Government extends social distancing measures under Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance

The Government will gazette directions and specifications 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) today (October 6) to largely maintain the social distancing measures currently in place. These measures will take effect at 0.00am on October 9 for a period of seven days till October 15.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "It is worrying that local confirmed cases with unknown sources of infection continued to be reported in recent days, indicating the existence of silent transmission chains in the community. While there has yet to be a significant rebound of the epidemic situation, it is noted that the seven-day average number of locally confirmed cases has not dropped further in the past week, and even showed signs of rebound in the past few days. Moreover, the seven-day average number of cases of unknown sources continued to increase after reaching a low level early last week. The epidemic situation certainly allows no room for optimism."

"We understand that members of the public are experiencing anti-epidemic fatigue to different extents and have become less alert in combating the epidemic, after many months of fighting against the disease. However, if each of us as a member of society does not comply strictly with the various epidemic control and social distancing measures and does not remain vigilant in maintaining personal and environmental hygiene, the risk of a rebound of the epidemic would be extremely high and we may well be on the verge of a large-scale community outbreak. As the latest virus strain has higher transmissibility, the epidemic may worsen rapidly in a very short period of time, possibly causing the fourth wave of the local epidemic to arrive early."

Since late August, the Government, having regard to the fact that the epidemic has subsided from its peak in late July, has relaxed or adjusted the various social distancing measures under a refined and sophisticated approach in a gradual and orderly manner, so as to allow social and economic activities to resume as far as possible under the new normal. The measures include relaxing the restriction on the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places, extending the hours when dine-in services are allowed in catering premises and relaxing the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table therein, reopening all catering business and scheduled premises, and allowing team sports at sports premises.

Taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, starting this Friday (October 9), apart from refinements to the measures to allow team sports at public skating rinks, the Government will maintain all other requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business and scheduled premises.

The spokesman added, "As we have stressed time and again, co-operation and self-discipline of members of the public are the keys to the effectiveness of social distancing measures in preventing the spread of the disease in the community. Only with the co-operation of society as a whole can the Government continue to allow resumption of social and economic activities in a gradual and orderly manner. Therefore, the public's concerted efforts in fighting the epidemic and compliance with requirements and restrictions applicable to individual premises are of utmost importance. Otherwise, when there is another large-scale outbreak in the community, the Government will have no choice but to significantly tighten social distancing measures in order to safeguard public health."

The Government calls on the public to continue maintaining the awareness of epidemic prevention when resuming social and economic activities, and to continue to stay vigilant in maintaining personal and environmental hygiene with a view to making concerted efforts to prevent another outbreak in the community and to prevent the hard work the entire community has put in for almost three months from going in vain. The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and review and adjust the various measures in place from time to time while striking a balance among disease prevention and control, economic needs and level of acceptance of the society, and will announce the latest social distancing measures in a timely manner.

The requirements and restrictions under the latest directions and specifications (details of the arrangements for premises under Cap. 599F at Annex 1) are as follows:

(I) Catering premises and scheduled premises

The requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business and scheduled premises will be maintained to a large extent (see Annex 1 for details) during the seven-day period from October 9 to 15, 2020. Amongst others, activities and facilities involving higher health risks such as dancing activities, steam and sauna facilities and ball pits will continue to be suspended or prohibited from opening. To provide more opportunities for the general public to exercise to maintain physical and mental health so that the public will be fit to continue to combat the epidemic, the latest directions will allow team sports at public skating rinks with the maximum number of persons allowed at more than four persons based on the particular team sports activities.

Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses and managers of scheduled premises that contravene the statutory requirements under Cap. 599F would have committed a criminal offence. Offenders are subject to a maximum

fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for six months.

(II) Group gatherings

Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will continue during the seven-day period from October 9 to 15, 2020.

Any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such gathering and knowingly allows the taking place of such gathering, commits an offence under Cap. 599G. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Persons who participate in a prohibited group gathering may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.

(III) Mask-wearing requirement

The mandatory mask-wearing requirement under Cap. 599I will be extended for a period of seven days from October 9 to 15, 2020. During the aforementioned period, a person must wear a mask all the time when the person is boarding or onboard a public transport carrier, is entering or present in an MTR paid area, or is entering or present in a specified public place (i.e. all public places, save for outdoor public places in country parks and special areas as defined in section 2 of the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208)).

Under Cap. 599I, if a person does not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement, an authorised person may deny that person from boarding a public transport carrier or entering the area concerned, as well as require that person to wear a mask and disembark from the carrier or leave the said area. A person in contravention of the relevant provision commits an offence and the maximum penalty is a fine at level 2 (\$5,000). In addition, authorised public officers may issue fixed penalty notices to persons who do not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement and such persons may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.