

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

The Government announced today (October 13) that the social distancing measures currently in force will be maintained and the 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) will be gazetted tomorrow (October 14). The above-mentioned measures will take effect at 0.00am on October 16 for a period of seven days till October 22.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "It is worrying that the seven-day average number of locally confirmed cases continued to increase over the past week, with a number of confirmed cases with unknown sources of infection reported, indicating the existence of silent transmission chains in the community and highly probable rebound in the epidemic situation. Meanwhile, the severe global epidemic situation may also bring public health risks to Hong Kong. Nevertheless, as we have reiterated time and again, under the new normal, we cannot and should not aim at having no confirmed case in the community for an extended period of time. Although we would much prefer seeing no local cases, it would be unavoidable to have sporadic cases and clusters in the community from time to time as the virus will co-exist with us for quite a long period of time before effective treatment and vaccination become available. In this regard, we will continue to adopt a targeted approach for reducing the risk of the virus entering and spreading within the community as far as practicable, avoid the one-size-fits-all approach when adjusting social distancing measures, and work closely with the relevant trades to strengthen infection control measures at the premises concerned, in order to allow members of the public to maintain social and economic activities to a certain extent as far as practicable under the new normal."

"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 and public skating rinks.

Taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, starting this Friday (October 16), the Government will maintain all 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 and the public's concerted efforts in fighting the epidemic and compliance with requirements and restrictions applicable to individual premises are of utmost importance. Only with the co-operation of society as a whole can we prevent another outbreak in the community and the hard work that the entire society has put in for the past three months from going in vain. 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 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 are as follows:

(I) Catering business premises and scheduled premises

The requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business and scheduled premises (see Annex 1 for details) will be maintained during the seven-day period from October 16 to 22, 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.

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 16 to 22, 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 16 to 22, 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.