

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 (November 3) to maintain the social distancing measures currently in place. These measures will take effect at 0.00am on November 6 for a period of seven days till November 12.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The local epidemic situation has continued to subside since mid-October, with the seven-day average number of locally confirmed cases staying at a low level. That said, new confirmed cases with unknown sources of infection have still been identified over the past week, indicating the existence of silent transmission chains in the community. In addition, it is worrying that the number of locally acquired cases has shown an increasing trend in recent days and that we are seeing small cluster outbreaks as a result of anti-epidemic fatigue and frequent social activities in the community. Meanwhile, the global epidemic situation has continued to worsen, with the number of new confirmed cases hitting a daily record high. The past 14 days have seen 80 imported cases involving new sources of infection. While we have enhanced the testing and quarantine requirements for travellers coming to Hong Kong, imported cases would continue to pose discernible public health risks to Hong Kong.

"Having regard to the fact that the epidemic continued to subside in October, we have relaxed the various social distancing measures under a refined and sophisticated approach in a gradual and orderly manner over the past weeks. The relaxation includes that under the latest round of measures which took effect last Friday, i.e. further extending the hours when dine-in services are allowed in catering business premises and relaxing the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table therein, raising the total number of people allowed in catering business premises and some scheduled premises, resuming live performances and dancing activities in catering business premises and clubs or nightclubs, and allowing members of the public to do exercise in indoor sports premises and public skating rinks without wearing masks. While our intention is to allow members of the public to further resume social and economic activities as far as practicable under the new normal, with the relaxation of social distancing measures members of the public appeared to become less alert in combating the epidemic, especially during recent festive celebrations when non-compliance with infection control-related requirements and restrictions at some premises was observed. As the number of locally acquired cases has shown an increasing trend in

recent days, indicating that the local epidemic situation has not yet fully come under control, it is difficult for us to further relax existing social distancing measures at this stage."

Taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, starting from this Friday (November 6), apart from refinements to the social distancing restrictions for spectator stands at public skating rinks, sports premises and swimming pools, the Government will maintain all other requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business and scheduled premises. The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and consider if there is room for relaxing social distancing measures in the next stage, subject to whether the epidemic situation is continually under control and the number of locally confirmed cases is maintained at a low level. If the epidemic situation fluctuates persistently and even shows signs of a rebound, the Government does not rule out tightening again the existing anti-epidemic measures including social distancing measures. As a rebound in the epidemic situation may bring about early the fourth wave of the local epidemic, which would likely coincide with the peak of the winter influenza season, such tightening of anti-epidemic measures may need to be pursued within a shorter period of time and to a larger extent as compared with the previous wave.

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. The public's concerted efforts in fighting the epidemic, staying vigilant in maintaining personal and environmental hygiene, and compliance with requirements and restrictions applicable to individual premises are of utmost importance. Otherwise, when there is another outbreak in the community, the Government will have no choice but to significantly tighten social distancing measures. At the same time, the Government continues to strengthen prevention and control measures in various areas. Amongst others, the preparations for setting up community testing centres are being made and the Government continues to enhance testing arrangements to assist members of the public to undergo testing in a more convenient and timely manner. We also call on the public to proactively get tested as soon as possible when having mild symptoms, so as to allow early identification of asymptomatic carriers in the community which will help further stabilise the epidemic situation."

Details of the aforementioned social distancing measures which are to be effective during the seven-day period from November 6 to 12, 2020, are as follows:

(I) Catering business and scheduled premises

(1) The requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business and scheduled premises (see Annex 1 for details) will be largely maintained during the seven-day period from November 6 to 12, 2020. Amongst others, facilities involving higher health risks such as steam and sauna facilities and ball pits will continue to be prohibited from opening. In addition,

social distancing restrictions applicable to spectator stands at public skating rinks, sports premises and swimming pools will be aligned with those applicable to other places of public entertainment such as cinemas and performing venues, i.e. seats to be occupied must not exceed 75 per cent of the total seating capacity of the spectator stands, and no more than four consecutive seats in the same row may be occupied.

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

(2) Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will continue during the seven-day period from November 6 to 12, 2020.

Any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such a gathering; and knowingly allows the taking place of such a 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

(3) The mandatory mask-wearing requirement will be extended for a period of seven days from November 6 to 12, 2020. During the aforementioned period, a person must wear a mask all the time when the person is boarding or on board 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.