

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 11) to maintain the social distancing measures currently in place. These measures will take effect at 0.00am on November 13 for a period of seven days till November 19.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "While the third wave of the local epidemic has been subsiding after reaching the peak in late July, 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 in the community as a result of, inter alia, anti-epidemic fatigue, frequent social activities and delay in taking tests. Meanwhile, the global epidemic situation has continued to worsen, with the number of new confirmed cases hitting a record high of some 600 000 cases daily. The past 14 days have seen over 60 imported cases involving new sources of infection in areas such as Europe, America and Africa, in addition to those involving very high-risk places. While we have strengthened the testing and quarantine requirements for arrivals, imported cases would continue to pose discernible public health risks to Hong Kong.

"Having regard to the development of the epidemic situation, we have relaxed the various social distancing measures under a refined and sophisticated approach in a gradual and orderly manner over the past two months or so. The relaxation includes that under the latest round of measures which took effect since October 30, 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, as well as raising the total number of people allowed in catering business premises and some scheduled premises, etc. 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. Amongst others, there was even a new cluster relating to a staycation at a local hotel identified in early November. As the number of locally acquired cases has shown signs of a rebound in recent days, there is no room for us to further relax the social distancing measures currently in place at this stage."

Taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, starting from this Friday (November 13), the Government will maintain all existing requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business premises and scheduled premises. The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and make adjustments to the social distancing measures in a timely manner upon considering and striking a balance among factors such as public health, economic impact and social acceptance.

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. In particular, we would like to remind members of the public to avoid mask-off group activities, which will pose significant risk of spreading the virus. In light of the staycation-related local cases identified in recent days, while such gatherings in private places may not contravene the social distancing measures, they should be avoided as far as possible from a public health perspective. If cases involving congregations in hotels or other private places continue to be identified, we do not rule out the need to explore amending relevant regulations under the Prevention and Control of Disease Regulations (Cap. 599) to regulate the said activities and premises. Again, we would like to call for the public's concerted efforts in fighting the epidemic. While resuming social and economic activities, members of the public should continue to stay vigilant in maintaining personal hygiene, and complying with anti-epidemic measures and social distancing, with a view to putting the epidemic under control as soon as possible. If the epidemic situation shows signs of a rebound and there is another large-scale outbreak in the community, the Government will have no choice but to significantly tighten anti-epidemic measures. As the rebound of 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 that of the previous wave."

Details of the aforementioned social distancing measures which are to be effective during the seven-day period from November 13 to 19, 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 maintained during the seven-day period from November 13 to 19, 2020. Amongst others, facilities involving higher health risks such as steam and sauna facilities and ball pits will continue to be 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

(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 13 to 19, 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 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 13 to 19, 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.