

Government fine-tunes testing arrangements for persons entering Hong Kong and updates penalty under flight suspension mechanism

The Government announced today (May 29), on the premise of maintaining the overall framework of stringent inbound prevention and control measures to guard against the importation of cases, the fine-tuned pre-departure and post-arrival nucleic acid testing arrangements applicable to persons boarding for Hong Kong from overseas places and Taiwan, and the updated penalty to be incurred by airlines for neglecting to verify the required documentation of persons boarding flights for Hong Kong and triggering the route-specific flight suspension mechanism. These will take effect from 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong time). The adjustments are made so as to reduce the impact on the journeys of persons coming to Hong Kong while continuing to firmly guard against the importation of cases.

Documentary proof of negative results of pre-departure nucleic acid tests

As COVID-19 nucleic testing services in many overseas places are being scaled back, inbound persons may find it difficult to confirm whether a local laboratory or healthcare institution conducting polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based nucleic acid tests is ISO 15189-accredited or recognised by the government of the place. Considering that these persons are still subject to "test-and-hold" arrangement and compulsory quarantine in designated quarantine hotels (DQHs) under closed-loop management, starting from 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong Time), inbound persons boarding flights from overseas places or Taiwan are only required to present when boarding the negative result proof of a PCR-based nucleic acid test conducted within 48 hours prior to scheduled time of departure and with samples collected by a laboratory or healthcare institution (proof of the 48-hour pre-departure nucleic acid test). They will no longer need to present the documentary proof of the ISO 15189 accreditation or recognition by the relevant authority of the government of the place of the laboratory or the healthcare institution.

Pre-departure PCR-based nucleic acid tests not required for inbound children aged below three

Similarly, as testing services in many overseas places have been scaled back, it has also become difficult for inbound persons to arrange pre-departure tests for young children. In this regard, starting from 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong Time), children aged below three who have stayed in overseas places or Taiwan will no longer be required to present the proof of the 48-hour pre-departure nucleic acid test when boarding. However, upon

arrival in Hong Kong, the young children will still be subject to PCR-based nucleic acid tests (normally conducted with stool samples) as per existing arrangement, and be transferred to DQHs for compulsory quarantine by designated transport under closed-loop management.

Pre-departure PCR-based nucleic acid tests not required for travellers transferring or transiting in Hong Kong

When the Omicron variant started to spread rapidly globally, as a measure to reduce importation risk, the Government required from December 8, 2021, the presentation by passengers transferring or transiting in Hong Kong of the proof of the pre-departure nucleic acid test when boarding a flight for Hong Kong. However, as the epidemic situation around the world further stabilises, and prevention and control measures have been strengthened at the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) to ensure the segregation of travellers transferring or transiting in Hong Kong to lower the risk of transmission of cases into the community, the Government will lift the requirement for passengers transferring or transiting in Hong Kong to present proof of the 48-hour pre-departure nucleic acid test starting from 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong Time). The Airport Authority Hong Kong (AAHK) will continue to implement relevant prevention and control measures for transfer or transit passengers waiting for their connecting flights at the HKIA. The Government will continue to implement the stringent quarantine and testing arrangements for inbound persons who will enter the community.

Pre-departure tests for recovered inbound persons previously infected with COVID-19

The presence of viral genome fragments inside the body of some recovered persons who had contracted COVID-19 may still be detectable through PCR-based nucleic acid tests. The Government earlier announced that under normal circumstances, for inbound persons who tested positive by nucleic acid tests with a low viral load during the "test-and-hold" arrangement at the HKIA or compulsory quarantine in DQHs and are recovered persons infected within 90 days, the Department of Health will, having regard to the data of the nucleic acid test results and recovery records, consider whether the persons concerned should not be classified as confirmed cases and be allowed to continue to stay in DQHs for compulsory quarantine instead of being transferred to community isolation facility hotels for compulsory isolation.

As the above situation may also occur to inbound persons when conducting their pre-departure PCR-based nucleic acid tests, the Government will provide an alternative pre-departure testing arrangement to recently recovered persons who were previously infected. Starting from 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong Time), for persons travelling to Hong Kong from overseas places or Taiwan that are recovered persons previously infected with COVID-19, they can be exceptionally allowed to board a flight for Hong Kong if they hold the following documentary proof to show that they were infected with the virus 14 to 90 days prior to boarding for Hong Kong and have recovered, and the result

of the rapid antigen test (RAT) conducted within 24 hours prior to boarding was negative.

(1) A certificate issued by a medical practitioner or a recovery record issued by relevant authorities in Chinese or English, showing that the person was infected with COVID-19 14 to 90 days prior to boarding for Hong Kong and has recovered (the personal information contained on the documentary must match that of the relevant inbound person);

(2) A test report in Chinese or English issued by a laboratory or healthcare institution bearing the name of the relevant inbound person matching that in his or her valid travel document to show that:

(i) the relevant inbound person underwent a test for COVID-19, the sample for which was taken from the relevant inbound person within 24 hours before the scheduled time of departure of the specified aircraft;

(ii) the test conducted on the sample was a RAT for COVID-19;

(iii) the relevant inbound person was tested negative for COVID-19; and

(3) If the relevant test report is not in Chinese or English or does not contain all of the above information, a written confirmation in Chinese or English issued by the laboratory or healthcare institution bearing the name of the relevant inbound person matching that in his or her valid travel document and setting out all of the above information. The said written confirmation should be presented together with the test report.

Post-arrival testing arrangements for persons entering Hong Kong

Currently, for all persons arriving in Hong Kong who have stayed in overseas places or Taiwan, apart from a PCR-based nucleic acid test conducted on the fifth day of arrival in Hong Kong during compulsory quarantine in DQHs, they must also undergo a PCR-based nucleic acid test on the 12th day of arrival in Hong Kong, regardless of whether they have been discharged early from compulsory quarantine. In order to enhance the health surveillance of persons arriving in Hong Kong who have been discharged early from compulsory quarantine in DQHs, and to detect and isolate infected persons earlier, all relevant persons arriving in Hong Kong on or after 0.00am on May 24 (i.e. June 1 being the ninth day of arrival in Hong Kong) and being discharged early from compulsory quarantine will be required to undergo an additional compulsory testing on the ninth day of arrival in Hong Kong. In other words, if the relevant inbound person is discharged early from compulsory quarantine, in addition to being subject to daily RAT and PCR-based nucleic acid test on the fifth day of arrival in Hong Kong during compulsory quarantine in DQHs, after they are discharged early from compulsory quarantine, they will also be required to undergo compulsory PCR-based nucleic acid tests on the ninth and 12th days of arrival in Hong Kong at a community testing centre or a mobile specimen collection station, or arrange a self-paid test by professional swab sampling at a local healthcare institution recognised by the Government.

Updated penalty triggered by omission in checking under the route-specific flight suspension mechanism

On the premise of maintaining the measures to guard against the importation of cases, the Government has all along been requiring all airlines to stringently enforce the boarding requirements for inbound persons, in order to reduce the risk of importation of cases from specific high-risk places as far as practicable. The mechanism has been operating smoothly since May 1, while some individual routes have been suspended due to airlines' allowing passengers who did not comply with the requirements specified under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H) to board. On the premise of the proper management of importation risks, as a way to encourage airlines to do their best in checking passengers' compliance of boarding conditions while avoiding the disruption to airlines' operations and the journeys of inbound persons, starting 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong Time), if it is the first instance within a 10-day period for a certain flight to trigger the mechanism due to passengers' non-compliance of the boarding conditions, the AAHK will issue a warning to that airline and impose a penalty of \$20,000. If the flights of the relevant route triggers the criterion again within 10 days, the passenger flights of that route run by the relevant airline from the same origin place will be prohibited from landing in Hong Kong for five days. If an airline refuses to pay for the penalty, the route will be prohibited from landing in Hong Kong when the relevant criterion is triggered in the first instance in accordance with the existing arrangement.

The Government will gazette the relevant updated specifications under Cap. 599H and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) to effect the above measures from 0.00am on June 1 (Hong Kong Time) onwards.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the epidemic situation of different places in accordance with the principle of guarding against the importation of cases. A basket of factors, including public health factors such as epidemic situation in particular places, testing rate, vaccination rate, volume of arrivals and actual imported cases, as well as the developments of the local epidemic situation and relevant local socio-economic factors, will be considered under the risk-based principle to adjust the boarding, quarantine and testing requirements for overseas arrivals based on risk levels as the situation warrants.