

Government further suitably relaxes social distancing measures

Having taken into account the latest epidemic development and relevant factors, the Government announced today (October 27) that social distancing measures will be suitably relaxed further with effect from November 3.

Currently, the epidemic situation in Hong Kong remains stable. The number of new cases hovers around some 5 000 per day, and the figures of severe cases and deaths have not recorded a marked increase amid the emergence of new mutant strains. On the premise of containing the epidemic, the Government intends to allow more extensive daily activities with a higher number of participants so as to resume citizens' livelihood to normalcy in an orderly manner. It has been decided that with effect from November 3:

(1) restrictions on the operating and dine-in hours for catering business premises and scheduled premises under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) will be lifted;

(2) patrons will be allowed not to wear their masks during photo-taking on stage at events held at catering business premises, premises where events are held and other scheduled premises. However, the mask-wearing requirement is still applicable to other parts of the premises and during time apart from photo-taking; and

(3) barbecue sites managed by the Government will be reopened. Government departments will gradually reopen relevant facilities starting next Thursday (November 3).

Other social distancing measures will remain unchanged, including the requirement for participants in banquets as well as patrons of bars/pubs and clubs/nightclubs to undergo rapid antigen test (RAT); requirements related to the use of "LeaveHomeSafe" and the Vaccine Pass, and restrictions for holders of Red Code/Amber Code in entering relevant premises; as well as mask-wearing for passengers on public transport carriers and in specified public places.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the latest epidemic trends, particularly on the transmission of new mutant strains overseas and locally, and review the adjustment to social distancing measures in every 14-day cycle ahead. This aims to protect public health while gradually resuming social and economic activities.

Specific measures (see details of the restrictions under Cap. 599F in Annex) to be in force during the period from November 3 to November 16 include:

(I) Catering business

(1) The maximum number of persons per table for catering premises is 12, and banquet activities with no more than 240 persons each are allowed. All patrons who enter the catering premises for attending banquets or enter the bar/pub zone therein must present proof of a negative RAT result obtained within 24 hours or a negative polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid (PCR) test result obtained within 48 hours. Otherwise, they should be denied entry.

(2) The maximum number of persons per table for bars/pubs is six, and the total number of patrons is capped at 75 per cent of their capacity. All patrons of bars/pubs must present proof of a negative RAT result obtained within 24 hours or a negative PCR test result obtained within 48 hours before entering the relevant premises. Otherwise, they should be denied entry.

(3) Mask-wearing requirement during photo-taking on stage at events held at catering premises and bars/pubs will be exempted. Furthermore, live performance and dancing activity are allowed in catering premises and bars/pubs, on the premise that relevant performers must conduct regular tests (i.e. two PCR tests in every seven days, and an RAT on the same day before entering the premises for performance or rehearsal), wear masks as far as practicable, and keep a distance of at least 1.5 metres from the audience or patrons (or with effective partition). Performers and the audience or patrons should not mingle on the premises. Participants of dancing activity must wear masks while they are dancing.

(4) Other requirements and restrictions on catering premises and bars/pubs remain in force, including that all patrons, when they are away from the table, must not consume food or drink and must wear a mask in general, and they must scan the "LeaveHomeSafe" venue QR code using the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application on their mobile phones/other mobile devices before entering the premises (excluding persons who only order takeaway). Operators of catering premises and bars/pubs are required to use the latest "QR Code Verification Scanner" mobile application provided by the Government to scan the QR code of a patron's vaccination record, medical exemption certificate or recovery record.

(II) Scheduled premises

(5) For swimming pools, sports premises, fitness centres, beauty parlours and massage establishments, places of public entertainment, places of amusement, amusement game centres, event premises, religious premises, barber shops/hair salons, bathhouses, party rooms, clubs/nightclubs, karaoke establishments, mahjong-tin kau premises and cruise ships (namely "cruise-to-nowhere" itineraries), managers must comply with the relevant restrictions under Cap. 599F. In particular, the number of persons per group is capped at 12 in general. All staff members involved in the operation of scheduled premises must conduct an RAT once every three days before entering the premises. The maximum number of persons per table for clubs/nightclubs is six, and their patrons should continue to be denied entry unless they can present proof of a negative RAT result obtained within 24 hours or a negative PCR test result

obtained within 48 hours before entering the relevant premises.

(6) Staff members and patrons alike must wear a mask at all times save for exempted circumstances. Mask-wearing requirement during photo-taking on stage at events held at scheduled premises will be exempted. Users are allowed not to wear masks when they are exercising in sports premises as well as fitness centres which meet the requirement on air change.

(7) Live performance and dancing activity are allowed in clubs/nightclubs, cinemas, museums, as well as meeting rooms/function rooms in club-houses and hotels or guesthouses, on the premise that relevant performers must conduct regular tests (i.e. two PCR tests in every seven days, and an RAT on the same day before entering the premises for performance or rehearsal), wear masks as far as practicable, and keep a distance of at least 1.5 metres from the audience or patrons (or with effective partition). Performers and the audience or patrons should not mingle on the premises. Participants of a dancing activity must wear masks while they are dancing.

(8) For club-houses and hotels or guesthouses, managers must continue to comply with the relevant restrictions under Cap. 599F, and the catering premises, bars/pubs and scheduled premises therein must comply with all applicable requirements.

(9) For shopping malls, department stores, supermarkets and markets, the manager/person-in-charge must continue to comply with the relevant restrictions under Cap. 599F, including fulfilling the relevant requirements on use of "LeaveHomeSafe" and the Vaccine Pass under "passive checking".

(10) The restriction on the number of persons allowed in premises such as cinemas, performance venues, museums, event premises and religious premises etc. remains at 85 per cent of their capacity. Patrons may eat and drink in cinema houses or outdoor areas of theme parks.

(III) Mask-wearing requirement

(11) The mandatory mask-wearing requirement under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) will be extended. 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. Persons are allowed not to wear masks if they are present in outdoor public places in country parks and special areas as defined in section 2 of the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208), or are conducting strenuous physical activity (e.g. exercising or jogging) in outdoor public places.

(12) 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 3 (\$10,000). 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 at \$5,000.

(IV) Group gatherings

(13) Unless exempted, group gatherings of more than 12 persons in public places is prohibited. The requirement is also applicable to group gatherings in catering premises, bars/pubs and scheduled premises regulated under Cap. 599F in which the relevant requirements or restrictions are not complied with.

(14) Subject to relevant requirements, local group tours with no more than 30 persons may continue to be conducted. The relevant requirements include (i) relevant staff have received three doses of vaccine, and conducted an RAT on the same day before the commencement of local group tour activities, and (ii) all tour participants have fulfilled the prevailing Vaccine Pass requirements. If all tour participants have conducted an RAT on the same day of the tour before the commencement of local group tour activities, the relevant restriction on the number of participants will be relaxed to 100 persons.

(15) 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 be issued fixed penalty notices and they may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty at \$5,000.

A Government spokesman said, "Upholding the principles of science-based and targeted anti-epidemic measures, proper management of risks and citizen-focused facilitation, the Government will continue to prudently adjust social distancing measures in view of the epidemic development. This serves to boost the economic momentum while avoiding an epidemic rebound and preventing Hong Kong from backtracking along the path to normalcy. We solemnly urge citizens to receive COVID-19 vaccine and seasonal influenza vaccine as early as practicable so as to get themselves and their family members well protected before winter."