

Government further tightens social distancing measures

In view of the development of COVID-19 in Hong Kong, the Government announced on November 24 to further tighten social distancing measures under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F).

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The COVID-19 epidemic situation has been worsening drastically. There have been over a hundred confirmed cases reported from the large outbreak cluster caused by group gathering activities in indoor premises. At the same time, there have been a number of local cases with unknown source reported in the last few days, indicating the existence of many silent transmission chains in the community. The Secretary for Food and Health has been tightening various social distancing measures since November 14. However, given the serious epidemic situation, we need to further tighten the social distancing measures under Cap. 599F, targeting those closed, crowded, closely-contacted, and mask-off leisure and entertainment group activities."

The latest details of requirements and restrictions are as follows:

(I) Catering premises and scheduled premises (details at Annex 1)

1. All bars or pubs, bath-houses, clubs or nightclubs must be closed. Party rooms will continue to be closed;

2. The number of people participating in any one banquet in catering premises will be limited to 40;

3. Apart from catering premises, live performance and dancing must not be allowed in meeting rooms or function rooms of clubhouses;

4. For hotels and guesthouses, restrictions will be imposed on gathering activities and infection control measures will be strengthened, including no more than four persons in a guest room, no more than eight persons in a suite with more than one bedroom, and no more than 20 persons during any religious or cultural ritual in relation to a wedding. Operators of hotels must arrange for persons under quarantine to be segregated from other persons not under quarantine, and must take reasonable steps to ensure that persons under quarantine cannot leave their guest rooms and cannot receive any visitors into their guest rooms during the quarantine period;

5. Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses providing dine-in services and scheduled premises must apply for a "LeaveHomeSafe" venue QR code from the Government on or before December 2, and display the QR code obtained at the entrance of the premises or at a conspicuous position within two working days upon receipt of the QR code; and

6. Other requirements and restrictions on catering business and scheduled premises will be maintained, including no dine-in service from 0.00am to 4.59am and no more than four persons per table in catering premises with the number of customers not exceeding 50% of the seating capacity. Persons must not consume food or drink and must wear a mask when they are away from the table in catering premises. Facilities involving higher health risks such as steam and sauna facilities and ball pits will continue to be closed.

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"In view of the recent development of the epidemic, the Government considers it necessary to prohibit high-risk dancing activities, particularly dancing parties in entertainment catering venues. Specifically, under the latest direction of Cap. 599F, live performance and dancing must not be allowed in all catering premises (including catering premises in hotels), meeting rooms and function rooms in hotels/guesthouses, as well as clubhouses. Party rooms, clubs or nightclubs must be closed. Meanwhile, dancing schools which fulfil the definition of fitness centres under Cap. 599F have to follow the relevant infection control measures to continue their operation. Such measures include coaches/staff to wear masks all the time, other persons to wear masks when doing exercise unless there are 1.5 meters or effective partitions between each of them, no more than four persons in each training group or class, and training groups or classes of more than four persons must be arranged in sub-groups of no more than four persons and keeping 1.5 meters between each sub-group etc.. As for the other public places not regulated under Cap. 599F, they are subject to the restrictions under 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) where, unless exempted, group gatherings of more than four persons are prohibited and a person must wear a mask at any time in specified public places.

The Government gazetted the directions and specification under Cap. 599F to implement the above measures. The above measures will take effect from November 26 for a period of seven days till December 2, 2020.

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

7. Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will continue during the seven-day period from November 26 to December 2, 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

8. The mandatory mask-wearing requirement under Cap. 599I will be extended for a period of seven days from November 26 to December 2, 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.

The spokesman said, "The Government urges all members of the public to stay at home as much as possible, go out or dine out less often, and reduce the frequency of social activities with friends outside co-living family members to prevent getting themselves infected and subsequent transmission to their family members, in order to safeguard themselves and their family at this key moment. Maintaining good personal and environmental hygiene at all times is key to prevention of infection and the spread of the virus in the community."

"The Government will review the various measures in place from time to time in accordance with the development of the epidemic situation, and make suitable adjustments taking into account all relevant factors."