

Government increases supply of surgical masks through multi-pronged approach

In response to widespread public concern and anxiety about the supply of surgical masks in Hong Kong, a Government spokesman today (January 30) said that owing to the spread of disease which gives rise to keen global demand, the supply of surgical masks is expected to remain tight in the short term. The spokesman stressed that the Government has been working proactively to increase the overall supply of surgical masks with a multi-pronged approach.

Given the assessment by experts that the disease may last for a period of time and that there are confirmed cases in various countries and districts, the demand for surgical masks has risen sharply, causing difficulties in procurement. As the supply of surgical masks is tight in the short term, experts have advised the Government to continue the measures to minimise contacts among people and take a risk-based approach by prioritising the distribution of surgical masks to the personnel in need, in particular healthcare workers.

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, convened the fourth meeting of the Steering Committee cum Command Centre in relation to the Novel Coronavirus today. Having regard to the advice of experts, the Steering Committee cum Command Centre considered that it is necessary to prioritise the supply of surgical masks. Priority should be given to healthcare workers and personnel providing care services (including front-line healthcare workers, nursing staff in institutions, healthcare personnel in private clinics); people who provide essential services and need to contact the public at work (such as those providing public transport, emergency services and immigration services) and other members of the public with practical needs. Other members of the public should go out less and pay attention to personal hygiene, minimising the need to use surgical masks.

The Steering Committee cum Command Centre has reviewed the work of various government departments and the Hospital Authority (HA) in relation to the supply of surgical masks.

(1) All relevant government departments and the HA has all along maintained a certain number of masks as stockpile. Their consumption rate over the past month, however, was five to six times the previous rate owing to the disease outbreak. The current stockpile of surgical masks kept by the Government Logistics Department (GLD) can meet the operational needs of all relevant government departments, in particular front-line officers (such as staff members of the Department of Health, the Immigration Department and the Customs and Excise Department, as well as ambulancemen of the Fire Services Department), for about one to two months. The HA's current stockpile of surgical masks, taking into account the orders placed, is adequate for about

three months' consumption, although the stockpile has diminished owing to the increased consumption rate recently. The stockpile of the care centres is even less. The Government has proactively increased the overall supply. The GLD is sourcing globally and has contacted more than 220 suppliers from over 10 countries. It strives to remove all the unnecessary procedures provided that the quality of masks will not be compromised. The economic and trade offices outside Hong Kong are in parallel identifying suppliers of surgical masks in their respective regions. Nearly five million surgical masks which the Government has ordered over the past month has been delivered to Hong Kong since last week.

(2) On the supply of masks in the market, the Government is maintaining close contact with members of local chambers of commerce and the retail industry and collaborating with the Mainland Authorities to facilitate clearance so as to speed up their delivery to the market. The Government has also contacted the Hong Kong-invested mask suppliers in the Mainland, requesting for an enhanced production of surgical masks for Hong Kong. Their response is positive in general. Since mid-January, the Government has, through the collaboration of the customs authorities in the two places, facilitated a supply of nearly eight million surgical masks, which have arrived or will soon arrive in Hong Kong. It is also rendering assistance to another batch involving more than 24 million masks to be delivered to Hong Kong. The Government will continue to liaise with the relevant Mainland departments. It appeals to retailers to arrange for the sales of surgical masks to the public at a usual price level as soon as possible upon their delivery to Hong Kong.

(3) In addition to imports, the Government strives to explore local production. The Correctional Services Department will try to extend production to 24 hours, increasing the production from 1.1 million to 1.8 million per month. The Government has also contacted the only local producer of surgical masks, which has already enhanced the overall outputs from 800 000 a month to 1.6 million. The Government would welcome merchants to relocate the production lines to Hong Kong to increase local supply. The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau will provide full facilitation;

(4) Recently, some surgical masks have been donated by some private organisations to the HA and a small quantity was donated to the Government. As regards these donated masks, the Labour and Welfare Bureau will later liaise with non-governmental organisations to help distribute to the people in need through such channels as food banks. The Government appeals for more donation of surgical masks by private organisations and it will arrange to distribute them to people in need;

(5) The Government has identified some small-scale surgical mask suppliers and will help organisations in need to procure from them. For example, the Government is getting in touch with the Hong Kong Medical Association to help private clinics procure surgical masks from those suppliers;

(6) Meanwhile, the Customs and Excise Department is conducting large-scale territory-wide special operations to combat surgical masks with false origin claims, non-compliance with consumer goods safety standards and false

trademarks to protect safety and rights of the public. In the operation today, customs officers seized a batch of surgical masks with suspected false trade descriptions in a drug store in Mong Kok and an arrest was made. The Customs and Excise Department will continue the operations.

During the period when the supply of masks is still tight, the Government appeals to members of the public to go out less often and reduce social contact in accordance with experts' advice. The Government announced a package of measures to prevent people from gathering and contacting. They include extending the Chinese New Year holidays of all schools in Hong Kong, arranging some employees of the Government to work at home and appealing to employers to make flexible work arrangements for their employees in accordance with their operational needs, closing some of the government facilities such as leisure and cultural facilities and suspending recreation and sports programmes, as well as adjusting services subsidised by the Social Welfare Department. The Steering Committee cum Command Centre will actively consider maintaining the above-mentioned measures before the short supply of masks has been alleviated, and will make an announcement as soon as possible.

The Government spokesman pointed out that according to the recommendations of the Centre for Health Protection, although surgical masks can effectively prevent the spread of disease, the public should also pay attention to personal hygiene in addition to wearing surgical masks. Members of the public should perform hand hygiene more frequently especially if they were not wearing surgical masks. When hands are contaminated by respiratory secretions after coughing or sneezing, they should wash their hands with liquid soap and dispose of soiled tissues into a lidded rubbish bin.

The spokesman expressed that the Government fully understood and will do its best to respond to public concerns about the supply of surgical masks. Regarding the rumours that the Government had hoarded a large number of surgical masks; the Home Affairs Department would distribute surgical masks; or even that the Chief Executive had approved the transfer of surgical masks to the Mainland authorities, the spokesman solemnly clarified that there was absolutely no truth in them. The spokesman stressed that the Government will always take the health of Hong Kong people as the first consideration. At this critical moment, the Government urges the public to unite and do their best in disease prevention and control measures without being misled by rumours. The Government also once again expresses its sincere gratitude to the front-line healthcare and emergency services staff who have always been standing fast at their posts at this critical moment.