

Government maintains existing social distancing measures

The Government announced today (September 20) the gazettal of the extension of existing social distancing measures in accordance with the public health emergency regulations under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance. The measures will be effective from September 22 to October 5.

The number of daily new cases in Hong Kong has started to show signs of decline, slightly relieving the pressure on the public healthcare system managed by the Hospital Authority (HA). It is now a critical time to further stabilise the epidemic situation. To have a clear observation of the epidemic trend, the Government decided to maintain the existing social distancing measures in the next 14-day cycle.

Relevant measures include allowing all catering premises and scheduled premises to continue to operate subject to strict compliance with requirements including those concerning Vaccine Pass, Red Code and Amber Code as well as testing. Other requirements, such as mask-wearing for citizens on transport carriers and in specified public places, as well as prohibition of group gatherings in public places, also remain in force.

Specific measures (see details of the restrictions under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) in Annex 1) to be in force during the period from September 22 to October 5 include:

(I) Catering business

(1) From 0.00am to 4.59am every day, save for specific premises (see Annex 2), a person responsible for carrying on a catering business must continue to cease selling or supplying food or drink for consumption on the premises of the business, and close any premises or part of the premises (whichever is applicable) on which food or drink is sold or supplied by the business for consumption on the premises. The premises concerned may still sell or supply food and/or drink for takeaway services and deliveries. A person responsible for carrying on a catering business is also required to put up a notice at the entrance to the catering premises to remind patrons that food or drink should not be consumed in areas adjacent to the catering premises. All patrons who enter the catering premises for attending banquets or enter the bar/pub zone therein must present proof of a negative rapid antigen test (RAT) result obtained within 24 hours or a negative PCR test result obtained within 48 hours. Otherwise, they should be denied entry. The maximum number of persons per table for catering premises will be eight, and banquets with no more than 120 persons will be allowed. Live performance and dancing activity will remain prohibited therein.

(2) Bars/pubs may open every day from 5am to 1.59am of the subsequent day with a maximum number of four persons per table and the total number of patrons capped at 75 per cent of their capacity. Live performance and dancing activity will remain prohibited therein. All patrons of bars/pubs must continue to 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) Other requirements and restrictions on catering premises and bars/pubs will continue to 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, 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

(4) 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, managers must comply with the relevant restrictions under Cap. 599F. All staff members involved in the operation of scheduled premises must conduct a RAT once every three days before entering the premises. Live performance and dancing activity remain prohibited in clubs/nightclubs, 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. Staff members and patrons alike must wear a mask at all times save for exempted circumstances. Citizens 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.

(5) 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.

(6) 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".

(7) The restriction on the number of persons allowed in premises such as cinemas, performance venues, museums, event premises and religious premises, etc, will remain at 85 per cent of their capacity. Patrons may eat and drink in cinema houses.

(III) Mask-wearing requirement

(8) 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. Citizens 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.

(9) 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). In addition, authorised public officers may issue 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

(10) Unless exempted, group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will remain 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.

(11) 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.

(12) 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 the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Gathering) Regulation (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 at \$5,000.

A Government spokesman said, "With the concerted effort of our society,

the number of confirmed cases has eventually been brought down from the high level of over 11 000 cases per day in early September. The epidemic situation has reached a plateau and is developing a downward trend. We must seize the current opportunity and ride on the subsiding trend to further stabilise the epidemic situation. The Government calls on citizens to collaborate and keep on maintaining personal hygiene in order to jointly contain the risk of virus transmission.

"Boosting vaccination rate is particularly essential for safeguarding public health, especially for the elderly and children. The Vaccine Pass arrangements will be applicable to children aged 5 to 11 starting from September 30. By that time, these children are required to have received at least one dose of vaccine for entering premises subject to the Vaccine Pass. We appeal to citizens for arranging COVID-19 vaccination for the elderly and children as soon as possible, such that they can secure early protection and the protective shield for Hong Kong can be fortified as a whole.

"The Government will continue to uphold the principle of making targeted anti-epidemic efforts on a scientific basis in combating the epidemic. In the light of the ongoing epidemic development, the Government does not preclude adjustments to individual social distancing measures. The HA will also endeavour to minimise mobilisation of hospital beds in the public healthcare system and gradually resume its non-emergency services. The overall goal of the Government is to allow both the healthcare system and society to return to normalcy."