

Government relaxes certain social distancing measures

The Government announced today (December 20) that earlier relaxation of certain social distancing measures will be made with effect from December 22, taking into account the latest epidemic development and socio-economic needs.

The epidemic situation in Hong Kong has recently reached a plateau. The number of daily new cases peaked at some 17 000 cases on December 15, and hovered around 15 000 to 16 000 for the following few days. Although the number of hospitalised patients infected with COVID-19 has risen, the proportion of those in critical or serious conditions has remained stable.

Having considered the public health risks while balancing the needs for social and economic activities, the Government was of the view that there is room to make earlier relaxation of certain social distancing measures, including:

- (a) lifting the restriction on capacity for catering premises, bars/pubs and scheduled premises;
- (b) lifting the headcount limit in banquet activities;
- (c) lifting the requirements for patrons to conduct rapid antigen tests (RATs) pursuant to relevant regulations under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599), i.e. (i) patrons of bars/pubs, (ii) patrons of clubs/nightclubs, (iii) participants in banquets, (iv) passengers of "cruise-to-nowhere" itineraries, and (v) participants in local group tours will no longer be required to conduct RATs; and
- (d) allowing eating and drinking in (i) outdoor areas of places of public entertainment and event premises, (ii) outdoor areas of sports premises, and (iii) mahjong-tin kau premises.

Relevant requirements on the Vaccine Pass and mask-wearing will be maintained. The Government will closely monitor the epidemic development and, on the premise of safeguarding public health, consider continuing to relax social distancing measures in order to resume citizens' daily lives to normalcy in an orderly manner.

Details on the restrictions under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) to be in force during the period from December 22, 2022 to January 11, 2023 are set out in Annex. Specific measures include:

(I) Catering business

- (1) The maximum number of persons per table for catering premises is 12, and that for bars/pubs is 6.
- (2) Mask-wearing requirement during photo-taking on stage at events held at

catering premises and bars/pubs is exempted. Furthermore, live performance and dancing activity are allowed in catering premises and bars/pubs, on the premise that relevant performers must conduct 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.

(3) 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. 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, bathhouses, party rooms, clubs/nightclubs, karaoke establishments 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.

(5) 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 is 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. Patrons/spectators/users may eat and drink in (a) performance venues, (b) cinema houses, (c) outdoor areas of places of public entertainment (including theme parks and racecourses), event premises and sports premises, as well as (d) mahjong-tin kau premises.

(6) Live performance and dancing activity are allowed in clubs/nightclubs, cinemas, museums, as well as meeting rooms/function rooms in club-houses and hotels/guesthouses, on the premise that relevant performers must conduct 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.

(7) For club-houses and hotels/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.

(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. 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.

(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). 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

(10) 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.

(11) Subject to relevant requirements, local group tours with no more than 100 persons may 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.

(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 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, "The Government will continue to uphold the principles of science-based and targeted anti-epidemic measures, proper management of risks and citizen-focused facilitation, and suitably adjust social distancing measures. We urge citizens to receive COVID-19 and seasonal influenza vaccines as early as practicable, thereby lowering the incidence of

severe illness upon infection. This will alleviate the burden on the public healthcare system and allow Hong Kong to keep progressing along the path to normalcy steadily."