

Government responds to media enquiries on legislating on mask supply and prices

In response to media enquiries relating to legislating on the supply and prices of surgical masks, a Government spokesman said the following today (February 10):

For the supply of surgical masks, the Government has been adopting a multi-pronged approach to procure surgical masks globally through different channels and means. These include the Government Logistics Department procuring directly from suppliers and through referrals from the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices and from individual sources in order to secure the supply of masks and other protective items as soon as possible to meet the needs of the Government operation. At the same time, the Government prioritises the distribution of surgical masks of the Government stock in accordance with the risk level. Priority is given to healthcare workers and personnel providing care services (including front-line healthcare workers, nursing staff in institutions, healthcare personnel in private clinics); and personnel who provide essential services and who are required to have contact with the public at work (such as those providing public transport, emergency services and immigration services). In addition to imports, the Government strives to explore prospects of local production. The Correctional Services Department has also increased its production volume. 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.

Given experts' assessment that the virus may last for a period of time and that there are confirmed cases in various countries and regions, the demand for surgical masks has risen sharply, causing difficulties in procurement. As the supply of surgical masks is tight in the short run, the Government considers that it is more pragmatic to strive to increase supply of surgical masks and manage the demand. The Government currently does not have any plans to mandatorily control the supply and prices of surgical masks through legislation, because this could be counterproductive, rather than addressing the problem at source, i.e. inadequate supply.

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 reduce need for people from gathering and contacting. They include extending the suspension of classes, 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 under the Social Welfare Department's subvention.

Besides, according to the recommendations of the Centre for Health Protection, although surgical masks can effectively prevent the spread of virus, the public should also pay attention to personal hygiene other than wearing surgical masks. Members of the public should perform hand hygiene more frequently especially if they are 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.