

Government strengthens COVID-19 testing

The Government has been refining its anti-epidemic strategies in accordance with the development of the epidemic, including conducting large-scale COVID-19 testing for groups of different risks under the three key principles of "compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis" with a view to achieving "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", and cutting the transmission chains in the community as far as possible. Having regard to the recent higher risk of transmission and infection in different premises or groups and the implementation of strengthened anti-epidemic measures for the resumption of various economic and social activities, the Government encourages or requires people of various groups to undergo testing. The supply of testing services is being further enhanced to cope with the increasing demand for testing so as to meet anti-epidemic goals and facilitate the public.

The Government has all along been providing convenient testing services to the public through various channels, including free testing service. For details, please refer to www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/early-testing.html.

In accordance with the latest direction issued by the Government on March 2 under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), persons responsible for carrying on a catering business and scheduled premises are required to arrange all staff involved to undergo a polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid test for COVID-19 once every 14 days in order to extend the opening hours of dine-in services to 10pm and relax the limit of person per table to four persons, or to resume businesses in the case of scheduled premises.

The Government reminds persons responsible for carrying on a catering business or scheduled premises that if they intend to operate under relaxed restrictions by adopting the infection control measures prescribed under Cap. 599F, all staff must undergo a second test on or before next Wednesday (March 10), and that all staff are required to obtain a negative test result by March 11 before they can go to work.

At present, employees of scheduled premise and catering businesses, construction site workers, school staff, as well as local residents and staff subject to compulsory testing may receive free testing at community testing centres. The number of tests available for appointments at community testing centres has been greatly increased to over 32 000 per day. As of March 5, the appointment rate of the 19 community testing centres in the territory for the next seven days is only about 30 per cent, with plenty of places available to meet the testing demand. Moreover, about 20 mobile specimen collection stations are in service to provide free testing to the public. Some of them are dedicated to providing services to staff in catering business and

scheduled premises under Cap. 599F only. The testing capacity should be sufficient to meet the testing demand of the relevant sectors. Staff from these sectors may attend community testing centres and mobile specimen collection stations in various districts for free testing.

In addition, they may also undergo testing through other testing channels (see www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/early-testing.html for details), including obtaining deep throat saliva (DTS) collection packs at post offices, MTR stations or designated general out-patient clinics of the Hospital Authority (HA), and return the DTS specimen to one of the 80-plus designated collection points.

Over the past few weeks, the Government has distributed an average of some 60 000 specimen collection packs daily, and the number of specimen bottles collected per day was about 27 000, which is less than half of the amount distributed. The Government calls on the public and organisations to refrain from collecting more sets of packs than needed so that others in need can also obtain specimen collection packs for testing.

Regarding the prolonged turnaround time of a testing contractor of the HA caused by an influx of testing demand within a short period of time, according to the report submitted by the concerned laboratory to the HA, the backlog has been cleared and the turnaround time for testing result has resumed normal to within 48 hours as per contract requirement.

The Government and HA have increased the number of contractors and streamlined the distribution of the specimen bottles to different contractors. At present, most of the citizens who return the DTS specimen bottles can receive testing results within two to three days.