

Government suitably relaxes social distancing measures

As the epidemic situation in Hong Kong has substantially alleviated in a continuous manner since March, with various monitoring indicators showing a consistently downward trend in epidemic activity, the Government announced today (April 14) the first stage of adjustments to social distancing measures that will take effect on April 21, including allowing resumption of dinnertime dine-in services, re-opening of most previously closed premises, as well as updates on the restrictions on gatherings in public and private places, in response to the aspirations of citizens and various industry sectors for resuming normal activities as early as practicable.

The epidemic situation of Hong Kong underwent drastic changes this January. The Government tightened social distancing measures on January 7 to the most stringent level as seen during the third and fourth waves of the epidemic, and announced on February 8 and February 22 further tightening of social distancing measures in order to combat the more severe fifth wave. Subsequently, the Government announced on March 21 the outcome of the mid-term review, including the decision to maintain the social distancing measures till April 20. It was also made clear that gradual relaxation of social distancing measures could be considered with effect from April 21 by phases should the epidemic situation of Hong Kong continue to show a downward trend without any sign of rebound.

In the past few weeks, the number of daily new cases in Hong Kong has gradually declined. While the figures have not yet reached a low level, various monitoring indicators on epidemic trends, including viral loads under sewage surveillance, percentage of positive cases in restriction-testing declaration operations, percentage of positive cases in community testing, daily point-prevalence announced by the University of Hong Kong, various in-patient statistics monitored in public hospitals etc, have all displayed a downward trend. In addition, through the mass scale of rapid antigen tests (RAT) conducted by citizens from April 8 to 10, it has been confirmed that the infection level in the community has gradually subsided without any sign of significant rebound. The Government considered that this had created the condition to begin relaxing social distancing measures suitably, with a view to resuming social and economic activities in a gradual and orderly manner.

That said, taking into account the high transmissibility of the Omicron mutant strain, the Government emphasised that citizens must strictly comply with the anti-epidemic arrangements upon re-opening of the premises when social distancing measures are adjusted to allow for gradual and orderly resumption of social and economic activities. These arrangements include holding valid Vaccine Pass, using "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application, complying with the restrictions on the number of persons and capacity of the premises allowed, wearing masks, taking body temperatures etc, and aim to maintain local capacity in containing the epidemic, minimise the risk of

viral spread within the community and avoid rebound of the epidemic which may in turn potentially necessitating re-tightening of social distancing measures.

Under the first stage, the dine-in service hours of catering premises can be extended till 9.59pm, which will allow resumption of dinnertime dine-in services. The maximum number of persons per table will be increased from two to four, and banquets with no more than 20 persons will be allowed. However, bars or pubs will remain closed. To enhance the anti-epidemic arrangements of catering premises and dovetail with the relaxation of the aforementioned business restrictions, all staff must conduct RAT every three days before entering the premises.

Most scheduled premises regulated under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) will be allowed to re-open, namely sports premises (indoor and outdoor venues), fitness centres, beauty parlours and massage establishments, places of public entertainment (including cinemas), places of amusement, amusement game centres, event premises and religious premises. The aforementioned premises would in general be subject to restrictions of allowing patrons in groups of four without exceeding 50 per cent of the capacity upon re-opening. Furthermore, team sports will be allowed to take place.

The Government will also allow the resumption of local group tours with no more than 30 persons on the condition that (1) relevant staff has received three doses of vaccine, and conducted RAT on the same day before the commencement of local group tour activities; and (2) all tour participants have fulfilled the prevailing Vaccine Pass requirements. If all tour participants have conducted RAT on the same day before the commencement of local group tour activities, the relevant restriction on the number of participants will be relaxed to 100 persons.

All persons must wear masks when they are present in these premises or joining local group tours, whether indoors or outdoors, save for exempted circumstances (such as eating or drinking, receiving facial treatment, participating in religious rituals etc). The Government will extend the mandatory mask-wearing requirement in all public transport carriers and public places under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I).

As for cinemas, patrons are generally not allowed to eat or drink in the premises; however, they may eat or drink in the individual house therein when relevant requirements are met. These requirements include (1) all staff involved in the operation of the cinema has received three doses of vaccine/are persons who have recovered and received two doses of vaccine, or are holders of a Medical Exemption Certificate; and (2) all patrons entering the individual house for the same screening have received three doses of vaccine (children aged 12 or below and persons who have recovered in the past three months will be deemed as meeting the entry requirement should they have received two doses of vaccine).

Restrictions on multi-household gathering (namely prohibition of gatherings in private places involving more than two households) under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) will be lifted. The Government will also submit a proposal to the Executive Council to raise the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places from two to four.

Specific measures (see details of the restrictions under Cap. 599F in Annex 1) to be in force during the period from April 21 to May 4 include:

(I) Catering business

(1) From 10pm to 4.59am of the subsequent day, save for specific premises (see details in 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 customers that food or drink should not be consumed in areas adjacent to the catering premises. All catering premises must continue to implement the Vaccine Pass arrangement, under which all persons entering catering premises must comply with the vaccination requirement save under exempted situations (see details in the [relevant press release on implementation arrangements for the Vaccine Pass](#)). The maximum number of persons per table is four, and banquets with no more than 20 persons will be allowed.

(2) Live performance and dancing activity is still not allowed in catering premises. Karaoke or mahjong-tin kau activity should also be suspended therein.

(3) Other requirements and restrictions on catering premises will continue to remain in force, including that all customers, 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).

(4) Bars or pubs will remain closed.

(II) Scheduled premises

(5) Scheduled premises regulated under Cap. 599F as listed below must continue to suspend operation:

(a) Bathhouses;

(b) Premises (commonly known as party rooms) that are maintained or intended to be maintained for hire for holding social gatherings;

(c) Establishments (commonly known as clubs or nightclubs) that are open late into the night, usually for drinking, and dancing or other entertainment;

- (d) Karaoke establishments;
- (e) Mahjong-tin kau premises; and
- (f) Cruise ships (i.e. suspension of "cruise-to-nowhere" itineraries).

As for swimming pools, they can only be opened for the training by or selection of the Hong Kong representative team and squad for specific sports events with a view to preparing for such events.

(6) For club-houses and hotels or guesthouses, managers must continue to comply with the relevant restrictions under Cap. 599F, including implementation of the Vaccine Pass, closing the facilities therein that are being used or operated as premises mentioned in points (4) and (5) above, and the catering premises therein must comply with all applicable requirements, including the restriction of dine-in service hours.

(7) For sports premises, fitness centres, beauty parlours and massage establishments, places of public entertainment, places of amusement, amusement game centres, event premises, religious premises and barber shops or hair salons, managers must continue to comply with the relevant restrictions under Cap. 599F, including implementation of the Vaccine Pass and ensuring customers use "LeaveHomeSafe". Staff members and customers alike must wear a mask at all times save for the exempted circumstances.

(8) 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 "LeaveHomeSafe" and the Vaccine Pass under "passive checking".

(III) Mask-wearing requirement

(9) The mandatory mask-wearing requirement under Cap. 599I will be extended during the period from April 21 to May 4. 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 (i.e. all indoor and outdoor public places).

(10) 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

(11) Unless exempted, group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will be prohibited during the period from April 21 to May 4. The requirement is also applicable to group gatherings in catering business and

scheduled premises regulated under Cap. 599F in which the relevant requirements or restrictions are not complied with.

(12) Subject to relevant requirements, local group tours with no more than 30 persons may be resumed. The relevant requirements include (1) relevant staff has received three doses of vaccine, and conducted RAT on the same day before the commencement of local group tour activities; and (2) all tour participants have fulfilled the prevailing Vaccine Pass requirements. If all tour participants have conducted RAT on the same day before the commencement of local group tour activities, the relevant restriction on the number of participants will be relaxed to 100 persons.

(13) 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 gathering commits an offence under 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, "The Government will continue to closely monitor the epidemic development and adjust the social distancing measures in a timely manner, so that social and economic activities can be gradually resumed. Since the epidemic situation has not been fully subsided, we urge citizens to observe all applicable social distancing measures and receive the third dose of vaccine as early as possible. Eligible persons should also receive the fourth dose of vaccine. This will help Hong Kong to resume normalcy at an earlier time."