

Government tightens eligibility criteria for free COVID-19 testing for targeted groups at community testing centres

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) announced today (August 4) that in the face of the threat posed by mutant strains and as a preparation for the fifth wave of epidemic, the Government will continue to require staff of targeted groups to receive vaccination as soon as possible, while at the same time strengthen the testing arrangements for staff who have yet to complete a vaccination course. In view of the protection brought by the vaccination, fully vaccinated staff will in general no longer be required to undergo regular or such frequent testing. Only in very exceptional situations can an individual staff member postpone his or her vaccination, e.g. if he or she is unfit to receive vaccination at the moment because of health reasons, but the staff will be subject to undergo more frequent testing which must be done by using combined nasal and throat swabs.

Starting from August, free COVID-19 testing at community testing centres (CTCs) will only be provided to individual eligible persons of targeted groups (mainly those who have yet to complete a COVID-19 vaccination course or are unfit for vaccination because of health reasons), and the eligibility criteria for free test will also be tightened such that relevant persons must present valid medical certificate/vaccination record/identity proof for receiving free test. Eligible persons shall make booking online (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en) for free testing service at the CTCs. Those who have no appointment or not meeting the eligibility/conditions need to pay for the testing service at \$240. The free testing arrangement will be available until end of August.

Persons eligible for booking a free test every three days

â–€ Staff of quarantine hotels and specified hotels (fully vaccinated persons: every seven days)

â–€ Staff of designated transport to designated quarantine hotels (DQHs) (fully vaccinated persons: every seven days)

Persons eligible for booking a free test every seven days

â–€ Staff of catering businesses

â–€ Staff of re-opened scheduled premises*

â–€ Staff of designated scheduled premises and public and private swimming pools/beaches* (not fully vaccinated persons: every 14 days)

â–€ Airport staff* (fully vaccinated persons: every 14 days)

â–€ Practitioners working at Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse (SSSH)

Persons eligible for booking a free test every 14 days

â–€ Construction site personnel*

Other persons eligible for booking a free test

â–Œ Working staff accompanying and receiving local group tours*

(To undergo one test within seven days before the tour, and no more than one free test every seven days)

* (i) Persons who are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination because of health reasons are required to present a relevant medical certificate; and (ii) persons who have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine (if applicable) should present relevant vaccination record (such as by downloading their electronic vaccination records or saving the printouts of their vaccination records to their mobile phones, or bringing along the printouts or copies of their vaccination records). The specific requirements for various targeted groups (including testing frequency, specimen requirement, conditions for receiving free test, etc.) are set out in Annex.

A spokesman for the FHB said, "The Government started to provide one-off free COVID-19 testing to targeted groups at the CTCs through online booking last year. The response has been positive. In the light of multiple and continuous cases involving the L452R mutant strain detected in Hong Kong recently, and taking into account the high transmissibility of mutant strains, we consider it necessary to extend the relevant testing arrangements and cover airport staff, staff of designated transport to DQHs and practitioners working at SSSH, such that we can take effective measures against the cases immediately to cut off transmission chains as quickly as possible."

Starting August 8, practitioners working at SSSH can undergo free testing every seven days at the CTCs. Moreover, certain groups need to undergo more frequent testing: starting August 9, staff of quarantine hotels and specified hotels and staff of designated transport to DQHs should undergo testing every three days (not fully vaccinated) or every seven days (fully vaccinated). The testing requirement for staff of Type B catering businesses will also be tightened within August, requiring staff who are not fully vaccinated to undergo testing every seven days. The specific arrangements for the regular testing of airport staff will be announced later.

The Government regularly reviews whether relevant targeted groups should undergo regular testing and if such testing should be publicly funded based on the latest epidemic risk assessment. Currently, construction site personnel and working staff of local group tours are required to present medical certificate or vaccination record to staff of the CTCs for free testing. This requirement will also be applicable to staff of re-opened/designated scheduled premises and public and private swimming pools/beaches (those who are yet to receive the first dose) and airport staff (not fully vaccinated) from August 5. In other words, persons of the above groups who are not unfit for vaccination because of health reasons will need to pay for the regular testing service. The Government does not preclude extending this requirement to other targeted groups later.

"Since the implementation of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme in late

February, there was ample time for persons of targeted groups to receive vaccination. The provision of free test for targeted groups involves the use of public resources. Given that the Government must uphold the principle of effective use of resources, public money should only be used to subsidise individual eligible persons on the nucleic acid tests in very exceptional situations," said the spokesman.

The spokesman reiterated that the two vaccines currently recognised in Hong Kong are safe and effective, giving protection to the vaccinated persons and those around them. The vaccines have been received by billions of people worldwide and getting vaccination is the best way to fight the virus. Except those with contraindications, most people are fit for vaccination. Currently, all Hong Kong residents aged 12 or above are eligible for receiving free vaccination. The Government calls on the public to treasure the vaccine supply in Hong Kong and get vaccinated as soon as possible.