

Government updates risk-based testing strategy

In view of the latest developments in epidemic situation, the Government has reviewed the priorities of testing services on a risk-based approach and announced the resumption of issuing Compulsory Testing Notices (CTNs) starting from today (March 22) to require relevant persons who visited specified premises to undergo COVID-19 nucleic acid tests. This helps to contain transmission in the community and protect public health.

The Government announced on February 25 the distribution of rapid antigen test (RAT) kits to persons living or working in places with higher infection risks while suspending the issuing of CTNs. It aimed to focus resources in expediting the processing of nucleic acid tests and leverage the extensive use of RAT given the community transmission risks, so as to identify positive cases and offer assistance as early as practicable.

As the testing capacity of Hong Kong has been further enhanced recently, the Government decided to resume issuing CTNs to require relevant persons who visited premises with higher transmission risks (including residents, staff and visitors, etc.) to undergo nucleic acid tests. The Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health (DH) will compile the list of relevant premises based on risk assessment, including recent epidemic data such as positive cases and sewage surveillance results. To dovetail with the above measures, the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app will resume issuing CTN notifications to remind persons who visited the specified premises.

Persons who have been tested positive in the past three months, including positive cases either by nucleic acid tests recorded by the DH or by RAT that have been self-declared to the DH, are no longer subject to further compulsory testing. For those who are subject to compulsory testing, they cannot use RAT to fulfil the compulsory testing requirement unless they are tested positive by RAT and have declared the result. In other words, a negative RAT result cannot be deemed as fulfilling the compulsory testing requirement. Furthermore, unless a person subject to compulsory testing has obtained a medical certificate proving that he or she is unfit to undergo testing using a sample taken through combined nasal and throat swabs because of health reasons, the person cannot provide a deep throat saliva sample to fulfil the compulsory testing requirement.

Similar to past practice, relevant persons who are subject to compulsory testing may conduct free nucleic acid tests by visiting community testing centres (CTC) or mobile specimen collection stations, or undergo self-paid nucleic acid tests on their own arrangement at local testing institutions recognised by the Government. Any relevant person who fails to comply with the CTNs commits an offence and may be fined a fixed penalty of \$10,000. The person would also be issued with a compulsory testing order requiring him or her to undergo testing within a specified time frame. Failure to comply with

the compulsory testing order is an offence and the offender would be liable to a fine at level 4 (\$25,000) and imprisonment for six months.

If citizens suspect themselves being infected with COVID-19, they should take the initiative to conduct nucleic acid tests, or conduct RATs and declare on their own if they obtain positive results. This will allow the Government to make record for relevant infected cases, and enable citizens to subsequently process matters such as applying for sick leave, vaccination and certification for travelling, etc. Under the strategy of encouraging voluntary testing, CTCs and mobile specimen collection stations in various districts of Hong Kong will continue to offer free testing services for citizens who consider themselves of having a higher infection risk in order to reduce virus transmission risk in the community.

A Government spokesman said, "The Government will continue to review testing services in light of the epidemic development and testing resources in a timely manner, with a view to effectively detecting hidden cases in the community. We urge citizens to join hands in our efforts in combating the epidemic and resuming Hong Kong to normalcy as early as practicable."