

Hong Kong Customs urges public to stop using four types of surgical masks suspected of exceeding bacterial limit (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs today (March 14) appealed to members of the public to stop using four types of surgical masks as test results revealed that the bacterial counts of those four types of surgical masks exceeded the maximum permitted limit. Traders should take off the products from the shelves as well. Customs is proactively looking into the source of those surgical masks.

Customs launched a large-scale territory-wide special operation codenamed "Guardian" on January 27 this year to conduct spot checks, test purchases and inspections in various districts on surgical masks available in the market. Samples of masks were also sent to the laboratory for tests on bacterial counts. Customs yesterday (March 13) received the test results of the latest batch of 24 test-purchased samples. According to the relevant hygienic standard for disposable sanitary products, the total bacterial counts of four types of surgical masks samples exceeded the maximum permitted limit by 0.4 to 11.5 times, in contravention of the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO).

The four types of surgical masks were packed in boxes of 50 pieces each, with the selling price ranging from \$200 to \$499. Two of the samples are labelled with manufacturing place as Turkey and Nepal, while the remaining two had no such labels. It is believed that the two types of surgical masks without labelling manufacturing place came from South-east Asian countries according to initial investigation.

Noted the test results, Customs conducted immediate enforcement action and searched four pharmacies located in Causeway Bay and Wan Chai today. Four directors suspected of violating the CGSO were arrested. No further seizure of the four types of surgical masks suspected of exceeding the limit of total bacterial count was made. The arrested three men and one woman, aged between 28 and 40, are now being detained for further investigation.

Apart from the four pharmacies in connection with the cases, Customs officers also checked multiple retail spots in various districts today and no such products were found for sale. Customs is undertaking in-depth investigation on the source of those surgical masks. Likelihood of further arrest is not excluded.

Wearing those surgical masks exceeding the limit of total bacterial count for a long period of time may lead to facial discomfort. Elderly or young children with relatively weaker body resistance or people with weakened immune systems are more easy to have respiratory infection in contact with

bacteria, leading to potential health risk. As such, members of the public should stop using surgical masks of the same type as those involved in the case immediately.

Customs will further examine the four types of surgical masks to establish the type of bacteria present.

To date, Customs has already test-purchased over 90 types of surgical masks for tests on bacterial count. The first three batches of 60 samples of surgical masks have passed the tests on bacterial counts and complied with the bacterial count standard. Customs will continue to conduct relevant test-purchases and tests.

Customs reminds members of the public to observe the following tips when purchasing and using surgical masks:

- Check the package of surgical masks to see if there is any damage or dirt;
- Stop using surgical masks with stain or odd smell;
- Pay attention to the proper way of using surgical masks;
- Change surgical masks at suitable time;
- Store surgical masks at dry places; and
- Purchase at reputable retail shops.

The "Guardian" operation, which has been running for 47 days as of yesterday since its launch on January 27. More than 3 200 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 22 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the CGSO and the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO).

The "Guardian" operation is ongoing. Customs will continue to take a speedy and holistic approach to combat supply and sale of anti-epidemic items violating relevant ordinances. The department will also continue to make prompt public updates if any irregularities are detected.

Under the CGSO, it is an offence to import, manufacture or supply consumer goods unless the goods comply with the general safety requirements for consumer goods. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$100,000 and imprisonment for one year on first conviction, and \$500,000 and imprisonment for two years on a subsequent conviction.

Members of the public may report any suspected violation of the CGSO or the TDO to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk). Customs will look into every complaint received and take any necessary follow-up action.

