

Hong Kong Customs urges public to stop using one type of surgical mask suspected of exceeding bacterial limit (with photo)

Hong Kong Customs today (December 15) appealed to members of the public to stop using one type of surgical mask as test results revealed that the bacterial count of the mask exceeded the maximum permitted limit, in contravention of the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO). Traders should remove the product from shelves as well.

Customs earlier received a referral from a related organisation on the sale of suspected unsafe surgical masks in the market. Customs then conducted a test-purchase operation and sent the test-purchased samples for safety tests. According to the relevant hygienic standard for disposable sanitary products, the total bacterial count of the sample of one type of surgical mask exceeded the maximum permitted limit by about 22.6 times, in contravention of the CGSO.

The surgical mask concerned was packed in bags of 10 pieces each and was sold for \$90. Customs officers test-purchased the surgical mask from a houseware retail shop in North Point.

After an investigation, Customs then seized 74 pieces of surgical masks of the same type, including seven bags of 10 pieces each as well as four pieces sold separately, from three shops of the houseware retailer belonging to the same parent group in North Point, Tseung Kwan O and Tsuen Wan. An initial investigation revealed that the surgical masks involved were imported from the Mainland by the trader.

Apart from the houseware retailer in connection with the case, Customs officers also checked multiple retail spots in various districts and no such product was found for sale.

A 62-year-old male sole proprietor of the houseware retailer group was arrested and has been released on bail pending further investigation.

Customs will further examine the surgical mask involved to establish the types of bacterial present. The department is also following up other referrals from the related organisation on surgical masks suspected of involving false efficiency claims and will take immediate action if any violation of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO) is detected.

In view of the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, 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 regarding surgical masks available in the market. Samples

of masks were also sent to the laboratory for tests on bacterial counts. To date, Customs has test-purchased over 700 types of surgical masks for tests on bacterial counts, among which, 681 samples have been tested for the bacterial counts.

Apart from the sample announced in this round, Customs has also announced another 11 types of surgical masks with bacterial counts suspected of exceeding the maximum permitted limit between March and July, of which the total bacterial counts exceeded the maximum permitted limit by 15 per cent to 11.5 times.

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

- Check if there is any dirt on the masks and stop using them if they have stains or odd smells;
- Avoid buying or using loose-packed surgical masks;
- Pay attention to the proper way of using surgical masks;
- Change surgical masks at a suitable time;
- Store surgical masks in dry places; and
- Purchase surgical masks at reputable retail shops.

The "Guardian" operation has been running for over 10 months to date. More than 6 300 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 39 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the CGSO and the TD0.

Under the CGSO, it is an offence to supply, manufacture or import 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 subsequent convictions.

Under the TD0, any person who supplies goods with a false trade description in the course of trade or business, or is in possession of any goods for sale with a false trade description, commits an offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$500,000 and imprisonment for five years.

Members of the public with information relating to unsafe consumer goods may make a report via Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk).

