

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

Hong Kong Customs yesterday (July 30) seized a total of 13 020 pieces of surgical masks in 434 boxes with a bacterial count suspected of exceeding the maximum permitted limit, in contravention of the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO). Members of the public are urged to stop using this type of mask and traders should remove the product from their shelves.

Customs received the test results of the latest batch of 14 test-purchased surgical masks samples on July 29. 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 1.3 times, in contravention of the CGSO.

The surgical mask concerned was packed in boxes of 30 pieces each with individual packaging. The manufacturing location is China, as marked on the box. Customs officers test-purchased the mask from a pharmacy in Sai Wan in early July.

After an investigation, Customs yesterday seized 304 boxes of surgical masks of the same type from the office of a supplier in Kwai Chung. An investigation revealed that the surgical masks involved in the case were imported from the Mainland by the supplier and were then supplied to three pharmacies located in Sai Wan, Mong Kok and Kowloon Bay. On the same day, 130 boxes of this type of surgical mask were further seized from the three pharmacies, with selling prices ranging from \$98 to \$128.

During the operation, four persons aged between 41 and 77, including a director of the supplier, a pharmacy director and two pharmacy proprietors, were arrested. They have been released on bail pending further investigation. Customs will further examine the surgical masks involved to establish the types of bacteria present.

Apart from the pharmacies connected with the case, officers also checked multiple retail spots in various districts. No such product was found for sale.

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 already test-purchased over 540 types of surgical masks for

tests on bacterial counts. Among these, 520 samples have been tested for bacterial counts.

Apart from the sample announced in this round, Customs has also announced another 10 types of surgical masks with bacterial counts suspected of exceeding the maximum permitted limit between March and June, 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;
- 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.

â€‹The "Guardian" operation has been running for over six months to date. More than 5 700 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 36 000 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.

