

New visiting and staff testing arrangements for residential care homes

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) said today (July 21) that, due to the continued occurrence of confirmed cases among residents and/or staff members in residential care homes (RCHs) under the recent fluctuating epidemic situation, the Government after careful consideration will implement new visiting and staff testing arrangements to safeguard the health of residents, staff and visitors.

(A) RCH visitation

From August 1, onwards, all visitors (except for official visitors) are required to undergo polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid tests for COVID-19 (PCR tests) prior to the visit and provide negative PCR test results obtained within 48 hours in order to visit RCHs. Visitors may opt for Community Testing Centres (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en) or mobile specimen collection stations (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en/station/), where free testing services will be provided if they indicate to the staff on-site that the purpose of the testing is for fulfilling the requirements for visiting RCHs. Visitors can also undergo self-arranged testing at their own expense at private laboratories that are recognised by the Department of Health (www.coronavirus.gov.hk/pdf/List_of_recognised_laboratories RTPCR.pdf) and can issue SMS notifications in respect of test results. The relevant sample must be taken through combined nasal and throat swabs and must not be taken by the person to be tested. Taking into account the epidemic developments and the protection of RCH residents as the priority target group, recovered persons who have tested positive in the past three months are also required to undergo the above PCR tests.

In addition, from August 28, onwards, the vaccination requirements for visitors to RCHs will be enhanced. Visitors are required to be vaccinated according to the Government's latest COVID-19 vaccination requirements as set out in the Vaccine Pass:

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| (1) Ordinary persons: | (a) Received three doses of vaccine; or
(b) Within six months after having received the second dose of vaccine. |
| (2) Recovered persons: | (a) Received three or two doses of vaccine;
(b) Within six months after recovery;
(c) Within six months after having received the first dose of vaccine after recovery; or
(d) Aged 12 to 17 and received one dose of Fosun Pharma/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine (Comirnaty vaccine). |

The current arrangements for persons who need to conduct emergency visits based on compassionate grounds will remain unchanged, i.e. visitors are still required to obtain negative results from rapid antigen tests (RATs) conducted in the designated area of the RCHs, and to provide negative results from PCR tests to RCHs within two days after the visit.

(B) Testing arrangements for RCH staff

To strengthen RCHs' anti-epidemic barrier and protect RCH residents, the Government will require all RCH staff, regardless of whether they have been vaccinated, to undergo PCR tests once every seven days starting from July 27 (i.e. the 73rd round of compulsory testing). To facilitate PCR testing among staff members, the Government will arrange designated testing operators to deliver PCR testing kits to the RCHs as necessary so that the staff can take samples on their own, and to collect these samples on designated dates. Staff members may also go for free PCR testing at Community Testing Centres or mobile specimen collection stations across the territory and be provided with priority testing by identifying themselves and displaying relevant identification to the staff at testing stations. Meanwhile, to safeguard the safety of staff and residents, all RCH staff are still required to perform daily RATs on their own and obtain a negative result before attending work at RCHs.

The Government will review the anti-epidemic measures from time to time and make adjustments to the testing policy.

The Government understands that the new measures will bring some inconvenience to the residents and their families as well as the RCH operators and staff members, and appeals to all concerned to continue co-operation with the Government to achieve the prime objective of protecting the residents.