

Public urged to receive vaccination early prior to winter influenza season and heighten vigilance against respiratory tract infection

The Department of Health (DH) today (December 1) again urged members of the public to heighten their vigilance against respiratory tract infection in winter including seasonal influenza. With the approach of Christmas and New Year holidays, it is important for individuals planning to travel outside Hong Kong, especially high-risk groups, to take proactive measures to ensure their personal protection. Given that it typically takes about two weeks for antibodies to develop, members of the public should prepare ahead and receive seasonal influenza vaccination (SIV) at appropriate times prior to the winter influenza peak. The Government has been keeping close contact with vaccines suppliers and will continue to endeavour to ensure an adequate supply of vaccine for the vaccination programmes.

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the DH has been closely monitoring the local activity of respiratory pathogens in the community. For influenza, the latest surveillance data showed local seasonal influenza activity continued to remain at a low level. The percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for seasonal influenza viruses received by the CHP's Public Health Laboratory Services Branch and the Hospital Authority was 3.92 per cent which was below the baseline threshold of 9.21 per cent, and the admission rate with the principal diagnosis of influenza in public hospitals was 0.16 per 10 000 population in the week ending November 25. For the other respiratory pathogens, the percentages of respiratory specimens testing positive for them in the week ending November 25 were comparable with the preceding week. More active respiratory pathogens included Rhinovirus/enterovirus, parainfluenza viruses and adenovirus.

To strengthen the immunity of the public against vaccine-preventable respiratory diseases (such as influenza, COVID-19 and pneumococcal infection), the DH has been administering various vaccination programmes to provide free or subsidised vaccines to eligible persons. Channels for vaccinations include public and private clinics, residential care homes and school outreach vaccination service.

The 2023/24 SIV programmes have been launched since September this year. A total of 929 000 doses of SIV have been procured under the Government Vaccination Programme, the Seasonal Influenza Vaccination School Outreach (Free of Charge) Programme and the Residential Care Home Vaccination Programme for eligible high-risk groups to receive SIV free-of-charge. In view of the vaccine usage and public needs, the Government has increased the procurement amount to over 1 million doses for the free vaccination programmes. Relevant vaccine suppliers have also undertaken to ensure a steady supply of vaccines procured by the Government.

In addition, the DH has been monitoring the vaccine supplies in the private healthcare sector and keeping close communications with vaccine suppliers. Private doctors participating in the Vaccination Subsidy Scheme will purchase influenza vaccines themselves according to the usual practice. It is noted that over 1.2 million doses of vaccines have been reserved for supplying the private healthcare sector in phases starting from September to private doctors who have placed pre-orders and additional orders over the past months. Additional doses of SIV will also arrive Hong Kong in December for supplying to the private healthcare sector. The DH has reminded private doctors to contact relevant vaccine suppliers for more details.

As of November 26, a total of over 1.44 million doses of SIV have been given so far under various vaccination programmes in the 2023/24 season, representing an increase of 23 per cent comparing with the same period of the 2022/23 season. This was attributable to concerted efforts of citizens, the DH, the Hospital Authority and private doctors engaged through the private-public partnership programme.

Meanwhile, the DH observed an obvious increase in SIV uptake this season for high-risk groups, especially elderly and children, when comparing with previous years. Vaccination at residential care home for the elderly is ongoing and has covered 48 per cent of the residents by arranging visiting doctor's outreach vaccination service, while the coverage rate of community elders increased by 15 per cent to the current 40 per cent; For children, the DH has worked together with the Education Bureau, Parent-Teacher Associations and district-based school associations to implement enhanced measures in raising the number of schools participating in the outreach programme. According to data of the DH, both participation from schools and consent rates from students showed improvement this season. The vaccination rate among children is now 43 per cent, which has increased by 44 per cent compared to same period last year.

As many respiratory pathogens including influenza virus may have increasing activity and community transmission during winter, while vaccination is safe and effective in preventing seasonal influenza and COVID-19, the DH strongly urged members of the public especially high-risk groups, to receive SIV as soon as possible. High-risk groups such as elderly persons, children and those with chronic illnesses, should receive a booster dose to be given at least six months after the last dose or COVID-19 infection (whichever is later), regardless of the number of doses received previously. COVID-19 vaccine can be co-administered with, or separated from, SIV. Details of receiving both COVID-19 vaccination and SIV are available online (www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/106096.html).

"To prevent respiratory infections, members of the public should observe strict personal, hand and environmental hygiene at all times. Persons with respiratory symptoms, even if the symptoms are mild, should wear a surgical mask, refrain from work or attending classes at school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly. They should perform hand hygiene before wearing and after removing a mask," a spokesman for the DH stressed.

â€œFor the latest information, please visit the CHP's [influenza page](#) and [COVID-19 & Flu Express](#). As for vaccination, the public may visit the CHP's [Vaccination Schemes page](#).