

Second round of compulsory testing for staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes to commence shortly

The Government today (December 12) announced that the second round of compulsory testing for staff members of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) and nursing homes will commence shortly.

In accordance with Section 10(1) of the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J), the Secretary for Food and Health yesterday issued a compulsory testing notice, requiring persons who are employed by and will be on duty at RCHEs, RCHDs, nursing homes and day service units attached to the premises of residential care homes, or who will provide services to residents or users through hire-of-service contracts with residential care homes and the aforementioned units between December 29, 2020 and January 4, 2021 (including full-time, part-time and relief staff), to undergo polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid tests for COVID-19 between December 15 and 28, 2020 according to the requirements and procedures specified in the notice. The samples must be collected by using combined nasal and throat swabs and must not be taken by the person to be tested.

The staff of the aforementioned institutions must choose to undergo the specified tests as below:

- (1) To receive free specimen collection services in any of the Community Testing Centres (see the list at www.communitytest.gov.hk/en/), Temporary Testing Centres (see the list at www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/site_pubsvc/page_supportser/sub_ttc/), or mobile specimen collection stations (see the list at www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/early-testing.html);
- (2) To have specimen collection by a healthcare professional or a trained personnel as arranged by institution operators for testing at private laboratories listed on "COVID-19 Thematic Website" (see the list at www.coronavirus.gov.hk/pdf/List_of_recognised_laboratories.pdf); or
- (3) To self-arrange testing provided by private laboratories listed on "COVID-19 Thematic Website" at their own expenses (see the list at www.coronavirus.gov.hk/pdf/List_of_recognised_laboratories.pdf).

Any person who fails to comply with the testing notice commits an offence and may be subject to a fixed penalty of \$5,000. He/she would also be issued with a compulsory testing order requiring him/her to undergo testing within a specified timeframe. Failure to comply with the order is an offence and the offender would be liable to a fine at level 4 (\$25,000) and imprisonment for six months.

A spokesman for the Social Welfare Department (SWD) said that SWD and the Department of Health would issue letters to institutions to inform them of the relevant arrangements and requirements. Institution operators should remind their staff members to properly keep the SMS notification of their test results or their test result reports.

Institution operators are required to keep records of their staff having received specified tests and the results within the timeframe specified by the Government. Institution operators also have to co-operate with the Checking Officers (Compulsory Testing) of the SWD who are enforcing the regulations within the residential care homes.

To allow more time for the industry to adapt to the arrangements, concerned staff members will continue to have two weeks to fulfil the requirements specified in the compulsory testing notice in this second round of testing, the spokesperson said. Subject to the development of the pandemic and the increase in testing efforts, the Government plans to require residential care home staff to undergo compulsory testing once every seven days during the third round, with a view to providing better protection for the staff and residents of residential care homes.