

Working Group on air change or air purifiers in catering premises holds another meeting in view of latest epidemic developments

The Secretary for Food and Health stipulated in March last year a requirement on air change or air purifiers to be complied with in dine-in catering premises in the directions in relation to the catering business under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F). The Working Group established for the smooth implementation of the requirement held another online meeting Thursday evening (January 6) in view of suspected clusters of infection at restaurants in recent days. The Chairman of the Working Group, expert members and representatives from government departments discussed the latest epidemic developments and offered views on anti-epidemic strategies.

Since the online meeting on January 4, the Working Group noted that additional confirmed cases have visited a number of restaurants during their respective incubation or infectious period. At the online meeting on January 6, apart from getting an update of the confirmed or preliminary positive cases of the previous restaurant, the Working Group also examined the initial observations obtained from site visits of two restaurants, including information on the implementation of air change and air purifiers at the restaurants concerned, as well as the seating distribution of the confirmed or preliminary positive cases and the duration of their stay etc. known at the time of the meeting.

The Omicron variant is the mutant variant with the most mutations since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and may carry higher transmissibility. It is also spreading globally at an unprecedented blistering pace. The number of confirmed cases of Omicron has been increasing rapidly around the world as well as becoming the mainstream mutant strain in some countries and places. It has rung a very worrying alarm bell.

The Chairman of the Working Group, Professor Yuen Pak-leung said, "As pointed out by the Working Group in its final report, the Working Group acknowledged that a basket of anti-epidemic and social distancing measures (such as mask-wearing, distance and partition between tables, the cap on capacity of premises and number of persons per table, relevant requirements on vaccination or virus testing by staff, and relevant requirements on vaccination by customers) implemented in dine-in catering premises since March 2020 have contributed towards putting the pandemic under control. Among them, measures on augmentation of fresh air supply or provision of air purifiers would help reduce the risk of virus transmission. Air change per hour (ACH) at six is an effective engineering control means, but the literature also points out that the relative risk reduction is not 100 per cent."

"Increasing ACH, either in lieu of or as augmentation to, the existing provision of fresh air at catering premises is a practical means taken worldwide. Catering premises operator must also pay attention to placement of air purifiers in accordance with on-the-ground situation and the manufacturer manual, with a view to optimising the intended effect. Air purifiers should be installed in a position that could effectively cover the areas occupied by users. Apart from sufficient outside air supply at catering premises, there must also be even distribution of air (air balancing) with reference to the circumstances of the premises; and also air mixing through air movement so as to achieve dilution and cleansing effect. All these could mitigate the stagnant air problem in dead corners," Professor Yuen continued.

The Working Group would also like to alert operators of catering premises through the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department that at all times when their premises are in operation, apart from complying with the ventilation requirement pursuant to the directions made under Cap. 599F, they must at the same time comply with the requirement under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) that the licensed premises must be provided with a ventilating system that will provide for each person accommodated in the premises an amount of outside air not less than 17 cubic metres per hour per person. The Working Group points out that catering premises operators must, at all times when their premises are open for business, always switch on and properly operate its ventilating system; and must remind their catering staff of the necessity of such arrangements, in order to ensure the fulfilment of the above-mentioned requirement on outside air supply.

The Working Group will continue to keep in view the epidemic development and assess whether there is a need to recommend adjustments. The Working Group appealed again to the catering sector, other sectors and members of the public to continue to comply with the relevant regulations on prevention and control of disease in a concerted and persistent manner to protect personal and public health. In addition, as vaccination is a very crucial part of the local anti-epidemic strategy, the Working Group also encouraged the public to proactively respond to the appeal to receive vaccination as early as possible.