

Working Group on air change or air purifiers in catering premises holds 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 Regulation). The Working Group established for the smooth implementation of the requirement held a meeting yesterday evening (January 4) at which the Chairman, expert members and representatives from government departments offered views on anti-epidemic strategies in response to the latest epidemic developments.

The Chairman of the Working Group, Professor Yuen Pak-leung, said, "The Working Group notes that over the past two weeks, multiple confirmed cases have visited a number of restaurants during their respective incubation or infectious period, among which a cluster was found in one of the restaurants. The Working Group is highly concerned about the incident and has examined during the meeting the relevant information such as the implementation of air change and air purifiers at the restaurant concerned, the seating distribution of the confirmed cases and the duration of their stay."

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 extremely fast globally. 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. In view of the tradition for families and friends to dine together during the Lunar New Year, the risk of virus transmission may further increase as people will take their masks off when having a meal at catering premises. At the meeting, the Working Group put forward some observations and advice after discussion of some facts known at this stage. The Working Group would like to take this opportunity to remind licensees/operators of premises, various sectors and members of the public to remain vigilant in adopting epidemic control measures. Operators of dine-in catering premises need to ensure that the air change per hour (ACH) is sufficient in their premises, and the fresh air supply is evenly distributed in the seating areas and individual compartments.

Professor Yuen said, "Indoor environment with sufficient and balanced air change or equipped appropriately with air purifiers of good and high efficacy performance can help reduce the risk of virus transmission. 'A Guide on Compliance with the Requirement on Air Change/Air Purifiers in Seating Areas of Dine-in Catering Premises' (the Guide), issued by the Working Group last year, stated that registered specialist contractor (ventilation works

category) (ventilation contractors) can adopt improvement measures to increase the ACH in the seating areas and individual compartments at dine-in catering premises. Operators of catering premises can seek advice from their ventilation contractors regarding balanced fresh air supply."

It is also mentioned in the Guide that ventilation contractors are required to calculate the number of air purifiers required in the premises and determine the position of air purifiers in the seating areas and individual partitioned zones, having regard to the on-the-ground situation and the manufacturer manual, to achieve the best expected effect of the air purifiers. Operators of catering premises are required to place the air purifiers in suitable places according to the manufacturer manual and the recommendations of the ventilation contractors, and ensure proper operation, maintenance and repair of the air purifiers, so as to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has all along been inspecting licensed catering premises and taking appropriate follow-up actions. Apart from issuing advisory letters to operators of catering premises, the FEHD also reminded them again during inspections that, pursuant to the directions under the Regulation, they must properly switch on, operate, maintain and repair the air purifiers in accordance with the manufacturer manual when the premises is open for business.

Professor Yuen continued, "Currently, the Guide formulated by the Working Group has played certain roles in reducing the risk of virus transmission. In view that the mutant strains mutate quickly, the Working Group will continue to closely monitor the epidemic developments in Hong Kong and other places, and will provide suggestions on the updates of the Guide when necessary, taking into consideration the epidemic developments, new scientific information, new directions under the Regulation, data on the implementation of the Guide, as well as views of the relevant sectors, etc."

The Working Group expressed the hope that the catering sector, other sectors and members of the public would 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.