

## DH urges high-risk individuals to receive COVID-19 vaccines as soon as possible as COVID-19 activity hits one-year high in Hong Kong

With the major surveillance indicators of COVID-19 reaching a one-year high, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (May 15) urged all sectors of the community to heighten their vigilance and enhance personal hygiene and protection measures, including receiving the initial dose of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible. People at high risk, especially the elderly and individuals with underlying illnesses, should receive a booster dose free of charge in a timely manner to minimise the risk of serious complications or death after infection.

"After the resumption of normalcy, Hong Kong experienced cycles of active periods of COVID-19 in every six to nine months. Taking into account local and global epidemiological data in recent years, the CHP is of the view that COVID-19 has evolved into an endemic disease with a periodic pattern. According to the CHP's analysis, the active periods are associated with the changes in the predominant circulating strains and declining herd immunity in Hong Kong. In early 2024, the predominant strains circulated locally changed from XBB to JN.1; while in the third quarter of 2024, they changed from JN.1 to KP.2 and KP.3; and they have further changed to XDV since late March this year. There is no evidence suggesting that XDV will cause more severe disease. Nevertheless, the changing nature of the virus should not be taken lightly. The CHP will continue to closely monitor the situation of the variant strains in accordance with the World Health Organization's recommendation, and be cautious of the possible emergence of more virulent or vaccine-mismatched strains of the virus in the future," the Controller of the CHP, Dr Edwin Tsui, said.

According to the latest surveillance data as of the week ending May 10, the viral load of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from sewage surveillance, the test positivity rate and the cases tested positive by nucleic acid tests in the laboratory have continued to rise over the past four weeks. In particular, the percentage of respiratory samples testing positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus gradually increased to 13.66 per cent from 6.21 per cent four weeks ago (the week of April 6 to 12), which is a record high in the past year. For sewage surveillance, the per capita viral load of SARS-CoV-2 virus was around 710 000 copy/litre, which was also significantly higher than that of about 390 000 copy/litre four weeks ago. During the same period, the consultation rate of COVID-19 cases at Accident and Emergency departments, general out-patient clinics and sentinel private medical practitioner clinics also recorded a significant increase.

"According to the surveillance data after the resumption of normalcy,

there were two relatively active periods of COVID-19 in Hong Kong, which lasted for about 15 weeks from April to July 2023 and for about seven weeks from February to March last year. COVID-19 became more active in mid-April of this year (i.e. about four weeks ago). Based on previous statistics, we expect the activity level of COVID-19 to remain at a higher level for at least the next few weeks," said Dr Tsui.

Regarding severe and fatal cases, in the past four weeks, the CHP recorded a total of 81 COVID-19 severe cases (including 30 fatal cases) involving adults. Epidemiological investigation showed that 83 per cent of the patients being elderly persons aged 65 or above, and more than 90 per cent of these elderly cases had underlying illnesses. Only one case had received a booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine in the past six months.

For children, the CHP has recorded five severe cases (no fatal case) so far this year. Of which, two have underlying illnesses and three cases have not received the initial dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. "This shows that even children who have been in good health can experience severe complications from COVID-19 infection. Therefore, I hope that parents will not hesitate to bring their children to complete the initial dose of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible. The currently prevalent XDV strain is a related variant of JN.1. Therefore, the JN.1 vaccine used in Hong Kong is effective in preventing the disease, reducing the risk of severe illness and death, and enhancing herd immunity," said Dr Tsui.

"Currently, the proportion of high-risk groups, especially the elderly, receiving booster doses of the vaccine is relatively low. This suggests that the public does not attach much importance to vaccination. Based on the surveillance data and vaccination figures, the CHP projected that about 75 per cent of the elderly aged 65 or above living in Residential Care Homes for the Elderly and 90 per cent of those living in the community had not received booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine timely according to the CHP's recommendation. I would like to reiterate my appeal to the high-risk groups, especially the elderly and persons with underlying illnesses, to receive an additional booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible," Dr Tsui added.

Apart from vaccination, the public should maintain stringent personal, environmental and hand hygiene at all times to minimise the risk of infecting COVID-19 and other respiratory infectious diseases. High-risk persons (e.g. persons with underlying medical conditions or persons who are immunocompromised) should wear surgical masks when visiting public places. The general public should also wear a surgical mask when travelling on public transport or staying in crowded places. When respiratory symptoms appear, one should wear a surgical mask, consider avoiding going to work or school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly.

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For the latest surveillance data, members of the public can refer to the CHP's weekly [COVID-19 & Flu Express](#). For more information on vaccination, please refer to the [COVID-19 Vaccination Programme webpage](#). COVID-19 Vaccination venues for persons [aged 6 months to 11 years old](#) and [aged 12 and](#)

[above](#) had been uploaded to the website.