

Government continues to actively follow up on human infection of rat Hepatitis E virus cases (with photo)

The Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, today (May 16) convened an inter-departmental meeting to listen to the reports by the Department of Health (DH) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) on the follow-up actions on the three cases of human infection of rat Hepatitis E virus (HEV) and progress of the rodent control work respectively.

Apart from the representatives from the DH, the FEHD and the Hospital Authority, the Chair of Infectious Diseases, Department of Microbiology of the Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong, Professor Yuen Kwok-yung, also attended the meeting and provided expert advice.

Professor Chan said, "We are very concerned about the situation. Epidemiological investigations by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the DH are underway. The FEHD has been adopting multi-pronged strategies including improving environmental hygiene, rodent disinfection and enforcement actions to combat rodent problem.

"At the meeting, we have formulated corresponding strategy to conduct the cleansing and anti-rodent work in all the 18 districts in Hong Kong as soon as possible and enhance inter-departmental collaboration.

"In the meantime, members of the public should stay vigilant as rodents can spread a variety of infectious diseases. To effectively improve environmental hygiene, people should start from cleaning. They should maintain good personal, food and household environmental hygiene," she added.

Professor Chan noted that cross-sector co-operation is essential to effective rodent prevention and control. She called on members of the public to support and participate in the anti-rodent work as well as to maintain personal and environmental hygiene. Relevant government departments will continue to work closely with property management companies and different stakeholders, and take concerted and effective anti-rodent actions so as to improve environmental hygiene in the districts.

HEV is a curable disease. To prevent HEV infection, members of the public should pay special attention to maintain good personal, food and environmental hygiene. For example, they should wash hands thoroughly before eating, store food properly or in the refrigerator, not leave food at room temperature for a long time, and use 1 in 99 diluted household bleach for general cleaning purpose. They should adopt pest control measures to prevent rodent infestation. High-risk individuals, such as elderly with major

underlying illness (especially those who have undergone organ transplantation), pregnant women, patients with chronic liver disease and patients with Glucose-6-Phosphate Dehydrogenase Deficiency (also known as G6PD Deficiency), who are infected with rat HEV may develop serious illness.

As regards the districts where the three patients reside, FEHD officers, together with the staff of the Housing Department and the property management company of the private housing estate, as well as other parties concerned, conducted inspections yesterday (May 15) at the concerned public housing estate, private housing estate and private residential building to observe the rodent infestation situation and provide professional advice and technical guidance on prevention and control of rodent infestation, including stepping up refuse clearing work, proper ways of placing baits and traps, methods of destroying rat holes and improving rodent proofing measures in buildings, so as to strengthen the anti-rodent work.

The FEHD conducts the anti-rodent campaign throughout the territory in two phases annually, during which the department, together with other relevant government departments, will enhance targeted rodent prevention and control work at problematic spots and strengthen education and publicity. The eight-week anti-rodent operation in designated target areas has been commenced on May 6.

The FEHD staff has also enhanced street cleansing services and cleansing of public markets and hawker bazaars in the target areas, including sweeping and washing of streets and rear lanes, emptying and cleaning of litter containers, and clearing miscellaneous articles and refuse on the streets, in public markets and at hawker bazaars, so as to keep the environment clean. In addition, the FEHD officers have also stepped up inspections of food premises, markets, hawker bazaars and cooked food markets and taken enforcement actions.

Since improper handling of food waste by food premises can give rise to rodent problems, the FEHD will start a five-week special operation from May 20, to target irregularities of food premises such as food preparation, scullery, improper storage of articles and illegal dumping of refuse at rear lanes (including dumping of bagged refuse in small hours), with a view to further enhancing the awareness of rodent prevention and control among the operators of food premises, by educating them to adopt measures to combat rodent problems and upkeep the hygiene condition of rear lanes as well as taking stringent enforcement action.

The CHP of the DH will issue letters to local doctors as well as hospitals to remind them to take heed of the latest situation of HEV. Frequency of testing will also be increased with a view to enhancing surveillance.

The usual HEV causing human infection is transmitted mainly through the faecal-oral route, for example, due to faecal contamination of drinking water. Besides, foodborne transmission can result from ingestion of undercooked meat or meat products produced from infected animals (HEV has

been detected in pig livers). Other rare transmission routes identified include transfusion of infected blood products, organ transplant and vertical transmission from a pregnant woman to her foetus.

Five Keys should be adopted to Food Safety in handling food, i.e. Choose (Choose safe raw materials); Clean (Keep hands and utensils clean); Separate (Separate raw and cooked food); Cook (Cook thoroughly); and Safe Temperature (Keep food at safe temperature) to prevent foodborne diseases.

The public are advised to adopt the following measures:

- Eliminate sources of food and nesting places for rodents in living environment. Store food in covered containers and handle pet food properly to avoid it becoming food for rodents;
- Store all refuse and food remnants in dustbins with well-fitted cover. Dustbins must be emptied at least once a day;
- Keep premises, especially refuse rooms and stairways clean. Avoid accumulation of articles;
- Inspect all flowerbeds and pavements for rodent infestation regularly; and
- Avoid high risk activities below to reduce rodent contact:
 - Avoid rodent contact and places dirtied with rodent excreta;
 - Avoid handling rodents with bare hands;
 - Wash hands with liquid soap and water immediately after handling animals, and disinfect contaminated areas; and
 - If wound appears, clean broken skin immediately and cover it properly with waterproof adhesive dressings.

