

Government continues to relax social distancing measures under Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance in a gradual and orderly manner

The Government will gazette directions and specifications under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) on September 16 to continue to relax social distancing measures in a gradual and orderly manner. The relevant measures will take effect at 0.00am on September 18 for a period of seven days till September 24.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The Government has previously made clear that it will, having regard to the latest development of the epidemic situation and risk assessment, relax social distancing measures under a refined and sophisticated approach in a gradual and orderly manner in phases so as to allow social and economic activities to resume. In light of the fact that local epidemic wave has continued to subside and the situation is stabilising gradually, we have begun to relax the relevant measures in phases over the last three weeks. Such relaxation includes relaxing the restriction on the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places, extending the hours when dine-in services are allowed and relaxing the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table at catering business premises, as well as re-opening most of the scheduled premises. With the identification of a number of asymptomatic carriers in the community through the Universal Community Testing Programme which has helped further stabilise the epidemic situation, we now have a more reassuring basis on which the social distancing measures can continue to be relaxed, thereby allowing early resumption of social and economic activities."

Taking into account the latest assessment of public health risk, starting this Friday (September 18), the Government will further extend the hours when dine-in services are allowed at catering business premises to midnight, and re-open those catering premises and scheduled premises which have not been allowed to open under the last three phases owing to the higher infection risk involved, namely bars or pubs, bathhouses, all places of public entertainment (including theme parks and exhibition venues), party rooms, clubs or nightclubs, karaoke establishments and swimming pools. The Government will also relax the restrictions currently applicable to some scheduled premises, including those concerning wearing of mask and arrangement of groups in fitness centres and sports premises, in order to provide more opportunities for the general public to exercise to maintain physical and mental health so that they will be fit to continue to combat the epidemic.

The spokesman added, "We hope to take this opportunity to emphasise that we will allow members of the public to resume social and economic activities under the new normal as far as practicable, while striking a balance among disease prevention and control, economic needs and level of acceptance of the society. However, at the same time, we appeal to public understanding that COVID-19 cannot be eradicated without effective treatment and vaccination, and the virus will co-exist with us for quite a long period of time. It is very likely that we will encounter the fourth wave of the epidemic this winter. Therefore, despite our intention to allow members of the public to resume social and economic activities, having regard to the experience in combating the third wave of the epidemic as well as the local circumstances, it would not be possible for us to relax the social distancing measures by a large extent, such as to the level earlier in June. Notwithstanding the above, when the next wave of the epidemic occurs, we will, depending on the situation at that time, adopt a more targeted approach to the tightening of the social distancing measures, in order to allow the society to maintain normal activities to some extent as far as practicable while combating the epidemic.

"Among the recent confirmed cases, there are still quite a number of local cases, and the sources of a considerable proportion of new cases remain unknown, indicating that the current epidemic situation is yet to stabilise and there is still silent transmission in the community. Therefore, there is no room for complacency in epidemic control. We will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation, and consider when and how to further adjust social distancing measures having regard to the latest risk assessment. At this stage, we need the co-operation of members of the public in order to further bring the epidemic under control. To this end, amidst resumption of social and economic activities, we appeal to members of the public to continue to maintain the awareness of epidemic prevention, particularly to stay vigilant and maintain personal and environmental hygiene, in order to prevent the recurrence of epidemic outbreak in the community."

The requirements and restrictions under the latest directions and specifications (details of the arrangements for premises under Cap. 599F at Annex 1) are as follows:

Catering business

(1) From 0.00am to 4.59am, save for specific premises (details at Annex 2), a person responsible for carrying on a catering business must cease selling or supplying food or drink for consumption on the premises of the business; and close any premises, or part of the premises, on which food or drink is sold or supplied by the business for consumption on the premises. The premises concerned may still sell or supply food and/or drink for takeaway services and deliveries. A person responsible for carrying on a catering business is also required to put up a notice at the entrance to the catering premises to remind customers that food or drink should not be consumed in areas adjacent to the catering premises.

(2) The number of customers at any catering premises at any one time must not exceed 50 per cent of the normal seating capacity of the premises. No more than four persons may be seated together at one table within any catering premises.

(3) Tables available for use or being used by customers within any catering premises must be arranged in a way to ensure there is a distance of at least 1.5 metres or partition(s) which could serve as an effective buffer between one table and another table at the premises.

(4) Any premises (commonly known as bar or pub) or the part of catering premises that is exclusively or mainly used for the sale or supply of intoxicating liquors as defined in section 53(1) of the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance (Cap. 109) for consumption in that premises or that part of the catering premises can be reopened, but the number of customers at any one time must not exceed 50 per cent of the normal seating capacity of that premises and no more than two persons may be seated together at one table.

(5) Live performance and dancing must not be allowed in any catering premises. All karaoke activities carried on at any catering premises and mahjong-tin kau playing facility provided therein must comply with the applicable restrictions and requirements. Other requirements and restrictions in relation to catering business premises would remain in effect, including wearing a mask at all times within any catering premises except when the person is consuming food or drink; conducting body temperature screening for all persons entering the premises; and providing hand sanitisers, etc.

Scheduled premises

(6) The following scheduled premises under Cap. 599F may be open subject to relevant requirements and restrictions:

(a) Amusement game centre: The measures include that game stations, machines or facilities next to one another and less than 1.5 metres apart must not be made available for use at the same time, or that there is some form of effective partitioning; no more than four persons may be allowed at each game station, machine or facility, etc;

(b) Bathhouse: The measures include that there must be a distance of at least 1.5 metres between persons having a bath; any person within the bathhouse is required to wear a mask at all times except when having a shower or a bath, etc;

(c) Fitness centre: The measures include that any person within the fitness centre is required to wear a mask at all times except when having a shower or when the person is doing exercise with a distance of at least 1.5 metres from any other person (except a coach or a person working at the fitness centre who should keep wearing a mask); no more than four persons may be allowed at each fitness station, machine or equipment; each training group or class must consist of no more than four persons and if there is more than four persons, it must be arranged in sub-groups of no more than four persons and there is a

distance of at least 1.5 metres between each sub-group, etc;

(d) Place of amusement: The measures include that any person within the public bowling alley and billiard establishment is required to wear a mask at all times except when having a shower; no more than four persons may be allowed to play at each billiard table or each lane; only group/private lesson is allowed at ice skating rinks; any person within the ice skating rinks is required to wear a mask at all times except when the person (other than a coach or a staff) is doing exercise with a distance of at least 1.5 metres from any other person, etc;

(e) Place of public entertainment: The measures include that entertainment stations, machines or facilities next to one another and less than 1.5 metres apart must not be made available for use at the same time, or that there is some form of effective partitioning; for cinemas, tickets to be sold and seats to be occupied of each house for film screening must not exceed 75 per cent of the seating capacity of the house, seating must be arranged in a way that no more than four consecutive seats in the same row may be occupied, no eating or drinking inside a house is allowed, etc; for places of public entertainment for live performance (except theme parks), only rehearsals or virtual performances, etc are allowed and no live audience is allowed; the number of visitors in theme parks and museum must not exceed 50 per cent of the capacity of the premises; ball pits must be closed, etc;

(f) Premises (commonly known as party room) that are maintained or intended to be maintained for hire for holding social gatherings: The measures include that any person within the party room is required to wear a mask at all times except when consuming food or drink; no more than four persons may be allowed at each room; all furniture and facilities must be cleaned and disinfected before and after each booked session; ball pits must be closed, etc;

(g) Beauty parlour and massage establishment: The measures include that all staff must wear protective gears such as masks and face shield/goggles at all times when providing service to customers and the relevant gears have to be changed or sanitised after service is provided to a customer; customers may only be served upon appointment; no more than four persons may be allowed in each partitioned service area, etc;

(h) Club-house: Catering premises within the club-house must operate in accordance with the above restrictions and requirements stipulated for catering business, including the requirement to cease dine-in services during specific periods; amusement game centre, bathhouse, fitness centre, place of amusement, venue with public entertainment, party room, beauty parlour and massage establishment, club or nightclub, mahjong-tin kau premises, karaoke establishment, sports premises and swimming pool may also be open subject to compliance with the restrictions and requirements applicable to the relevant premises, etc;

(i) Establishment (commonly known as club or nightclub) that is open late into the night, usually for drinking, and dancing or other entertainment: The number of customers at the premises at any one time must not exceed 50 per cent of the normal seating capacity of the premises; no more than two persons

may be seated together at one table; live performance and dancing must not be allowed, etc;

(j) Karaoke establishment: The measures include that any person within the karaoke establishment is required to wear a mask at all times except when consuming food or drink; no more than four persons may be allowed in each room; all furniture and facilities must be cleaned and disinfected before and after each booked session, etc;

(k) Mahjong-tin kau premises: The measures include that any person within the mahjong-tin kau premises is required to wear a mask at all times; tile sets must be replaced with cleaned and disinfected ones every time a new player joins or application of disinfection materials with durable efficacy must be applied on the tile sets, etc;

(l) Sports premises: The measures include that any person is required to wear a mask at all times except having a shower, or when the person is doing exercise within any outdoor sports premises, or when the person (other than a coach or a person working at the premises) within any indoor sports premises is doing exercise with a distance of at least 1.5 metres from any other person or is doing certain exercise; each group must consist of no more than four persons; there must be at least 1.5 metres between each group, etc; and

(m) Swimming pool: The measures include that any person is required to wear a mask at all times except swimming, or having a shower, or when the person is doing warm-up exercise with a distance of at least 1.5 metres from any other person; the number of persons to be allowed at any one time must not exceed 50 per cent of the designed capacity of the swimming pool; each group must consist of no more than four persons; there must be at least 1.5 metres between each group; if there is more than four persons, it must be arranged in sub-groups of no more than four persons and there is a distance of at least 1.5 metres between each sub-group etc.

Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses and managers of scheduled premises that contravene the statutory requirements under Cap. 599F would have committed a criminal offence. Offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for six months.

Group Gathering

(7) Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will continue during the aforementioned seven-day period.

Any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such gathering and knowingly allows the taking place of such gathering, commits an offence under Cap. 599G. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Persons who participate in a prohibited group gathering may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.

Mask-wearing Requirement

(8) The Secretary for Food and Health will specify, by way of a notice published in the Gazette for the purpose of the mandatory mask-wearing requirement under Cap. 599I, a period of seven days from September 18 till September 24. During this seven-day period, a person must wear a mask at all times when the person is boarding or onboard a public transport carrier, is entering or present in an MTR paid area, or is entering or present in a specified public place (i.e. all public places, save for outdoor public places in country parks and special areas as defined in section 2 of the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208)).

Under Cap. 599I, if a person does not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement, an authorised person may deny that person from boarding a public transport carrier or entering the area concerned, as well as require that person to wear a mask and disembark from the carrier or leave the said area. A person in contravention of the relevant provision commits an offence and the maximum penalty is a fine at level 2 (\$5,000). In addition, authorised public officers may issue fixed penalty notices to persons who do not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement and such persons may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.