

Government tightens social distancing measures

The Government will gazette today (July 9) directions under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) to tighten social distancing measures.

The epidemic situation of COVID-19 in Hong Kong has undergone drastic changes recently. New cases recorded during the period from July 2 to July 8, 2020 include 31 cases without travel history during the incubation period. Twenty-four new confirmed cases were recorded on July 8, including 19 local cases, five cases of which the source of infection is unknown.

According to the World Health Organization and health experts, COVID-19 would not be eradicated without effective treatment and vaccination. The Government thus is required to incorporate work in relation to disease prevention and control as well as infection management into the new normal of the daily operation of the society. To this end, the Government has all along adopted the "suppress and lift" strategy in order to quickly adjust epidemic control measures should there be inevitable sporadic cases or small-scale community outbreaks.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The detection of quite a number of local cases with unknown sources of infection detected over a short period of time raises an important alarm, reminding the community that members of the public must not let down their guard in terms of epidemic prevention and control. In view of the latest public health risk assessment, in particular the higher risks brought about by activities conducted without wearing masks as shown in recent cases, we are of the view that it is now necessary to tighten social distancing measures, including the limits on number of persons and capacity, as well as other infection control requirements on catering business and some scheduled premises."

The requirements and restrictions under the latest directions (details at Annex) will come into effect on July 11, 2020 for a period of 14 days till July 24, 2020 as follows:

Catering business

(1) On catering business, the number of customers at any catering premises at any one time must not exceed 60% of the normal seating capacity of the premises. No more than eight persons may be seated together at one table within any catering premises, while for bars and pubs, no more than four persons may be seated together at one table therein. Other requirements and restrictions in relation to catering business premises will be maintained.

Scheduled premises

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(2) On scheduled premises, the limit on number of persons at premises where activities are conducted without wearing masks are tightened –

(a) For party rooms and karaoke establishments, the number of persons allowed in each room at the same time is tightened from 16 to eight.

(b) For fitness centres, the number of persons (including the coach) allowed in each group training or class at the same time is tightened from 16 to eight. For a group training or class of more than eight persons, it must be conducted in a way to ensure that persons are arranged in groups of no more than eight persons and there is at least 1.5 metres between each group or there is some form of partition which could serve as effective buffer between each group. The coach must wear a mask all the time if he/she is not staying at a fixed location not less than 1.5 metres from other persons.

(c) For clubs or nightclubs, the number of persons who may be seated together at one table is tightened from eight to four. The number of customers allowed therein at any one time is tightened from 80% to 60% of the normal seating capacity or normal capacity of such premises.

(3) No eating or drinking inside cinemas and all places of public entertainment with live performance is allowed.

Other requirements and restrictions in relation to scheduled premises will be maintained.

All of the other directions issued earlier by the Secretary for Food and Health in accordance to Cap. 599F (i.e. the directions which took effect on July 3) will be suspended on July 11 procedurally.

"We will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and review the various measures in place from time to time with a view to making suitable adjustments taking into account all relevant factors. We also strongly urge the public to stay vigilant, maintain at all times strict personal and environmental hygiene, and maintain an appropriate social distance with other people as far as possible in their daily lives to prevent the virus from spreading in the community," said the spokesman.

Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses and the 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.

In addition, the direction made by the Secretary for Food and Health under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) which took effect on July 3 remains in effect.