

Hamster samples preliminarily test positive for COVID-19 virus

In view of samples collected from hamsters from a pet shop that preliminarily tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) announced on January 18 that all animals in Little Boss, a pet shop in Causeway Bay, and its warehouse in Tai Po will be humanely dispatched to minimise the potential risks of COVID-19 infection and safeguard public safety. Furthermore, all pet shops in Hong Kong selling hamsters must suspend business starting from yesterday. Hamsters from those pet shops will also be taken for COVID-19 tests and humane dispatch, while other animals of those pet shops need to undergo testing for the COVID-19 virus. Pet shops can resume operation when satisfactory test results are returned. The AFCD has also suspended the import of small mammals with immediate effect, and strongly advise members of the public to surrender their hamsters purchased in local pet shops on or after December 22, 2021, to the department for humane dispatch.

An AFCD spokesman said, "The AFCD received a report by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP), Department of Health on January 17 that a pet shop worker was confirmed to be infected with COVID-19. AFCD staff were sent to the pet shop where she worked for investigation and collected samples from 78 hamsters, chinchillas and rabbits for COVID-19 tests. Up till now, 11 samples collected from hamsters preliminarily tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, while the test results of other animals were negative."

"In addition, the AFCD also collected 511 samples from chinchillas, guinea pigs, hamsters and rabbits in the warehouse of the pet shop in Tai Po on January 17. COVID-19 testing is underway. It is learned that some of the environmental swabs collected by the CHP tested positive for the COVID-19 virus," he added.

The spokesman noted that apart from Little Boss, the pet shop in Causeway Bay, hamsters are sold in 34 other local pet shops. All small mammals other than hamsters (including chinchillas, guinea pigs and rabbits) in these shops have to undergo testing for the COVID-19 virus. These shops may resume business when test results are found satisfactory. Thorough disinfection and cleaning should be carried out in these pet shops during the period.

The AFCD has suspended the import of all small mammals (including hamsters) with immediate effect. The department is also reviewing the quarantine requirements for importing this type of animals into Hong Kong, including considering making it a requirement for animals concerned to undergo testing for the COVID-19 virus prior to departure by the exporting country or region and to be tested again upon arrival in Hong Kong.

According to AFCD's records, two consignments of hamsters were imported into Hong Kong on December 22 last year and January 7 this year respectively.

Upon consulting experts, the AFCD opined that the two consignments of hamsters have a higher risk of carrying the COVID-19 virus, while hamsters imported into Hong Kong beforehand is relatively less risky. Thus the AFCD strongly advises members of the public to surrender hamsters purchased in local pet shops on or after December 22 last year to the department for humane dispatch.

"As positive test results for the COVID-19 virus were found in a number of samples collected from hamsters, there is evidence that this batch of hamsters had been contaminated with the COVID-19 virus. Overseas studies show that once hamsters have been infected with COVID-19 in a laboratory environment, the virus can effectively multiply and be transmitted within the herd of hamsters, thus significantly increasing the risk of spreading the virus as well as transmitting the virus to humans and other animals. Onset of symptoms may not be triggered immediately after the hamsters have been infected, negative test results do not necessarily mean that the hamsters have not been infected. Moreover, testing over a thousand hamsters everyday is beyond the testing capacity of the authorities and keeping hamsters may also bring risks to animal keepers. Regarding multiplication and mutual infection of the virus, as well as the large number of hamsters involved, the AFCD does not have sufficient facilities and feasible means to isolate every single one of them and conduct tests for them repeatedly. Humane dispatch of all hamsters involved is a safe and feasible way to control the epidemic. European countries like the Netherlands and Denmark also mounted large-scale humane dispatch operations over cases of transmission of the virus from mink to humans in 2020," the spokesman said.

He also pointed out that animals of the relevant pet shop will be distributed to different branches for sale, thus tracing and identification of the import dates of different consignments within a short time is difficult. Humanely dispatching hamsters on a selective basis could not control the epidemic completely and may cause loopholes. To protect members of the public and safeguard public health, it is necessary for the AFCD to humanely dispatch those consignments of hamsters as soon as possible, to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading further.

The spokesman stressed, "In consideration of public health and animal welfare, the AFCD appeals to members of the public that they should abandon their pets on the streets in no circumstances. For the arrangement of taking in hamsters by the department, please call 2691 2269. Members of the public may also send their hamsters to the New Territories South Animal Management Centre."

The spokesman reminded pet owners to adopt good hygiene practices (including hand washing before and after being around or handling animals, their food or supplies, as well as avoiding kissing them) and to maintain a clean and hygienic household environment. People who have taken ill should restrict contact with animals. If any changes in the health condition of pets are spotted, advice from a veterinarian should be sought as soon as possible. Members of the public raising hamsters should keep them at home.