

Hong Kong Customs reminds public to avoid using loose-packed surgical masks (with photo)

Hong Kong Customs today (June 3) said the latest test results of surgical masks revealed that the bacterial counts of one type of loose-packed surgical mask exceeded the maximum permitted limit, in contravention of the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO). Customs reminds members of the public to avoid using loose-packed surgical masks as their safety is in question while the sources are unknown and basic product descriptions are missing.

Customs earlier received the test results of the latest batch of 40 test-purchased surgical mask samples. According to the relevant hygienic standard for disposable sanitary products, the total bacterial counts of the sample of a loose-packed surgical mask exceeded the maximum permitted limit by 25 per cent, in contravention of the CGSO.

The type of surgical mask concerned was loosely packed in a transparent plastic bag of five pieces each and was sold for \$20. The loose-packed mask has no label to indicate its brand or manufacturing place. Customs officers test-purchased the mask from a pharmacy in Tai Po in April this year.

Noting the test results, Customs conducted immediate enforcement action and arrested a 43-year-old male director and a 44-year-old female director who are now being detained for further investigation.

Customs will further examine the surgical mask involved to establish the types of bacteria present. Also, Customs is undertaking investigation on the source of the surgical mask.

Customs reminds members of the public to avoid purchasing loose-packed surgical masks since it is difficult to guarantee their quality and the safety risk is also relatively higher.

In view of the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, Customs launched a large-scale territory-wide special operation codenamed "Guardian" on January 27 this year to conduct spot checks, test purchases and inspections in various districts on surgical masks available in the market. Samples of masks were also sent to the laboratory for tests on bacterial counts. To date, Customs has already test-purchased over 400 types of surgical masks for tests on bacterial counts and, among these, 240 samples have been tested for bacterial counts.

Apart from the sample announced in this round, Customs has also announced a further eight types of surgical masks with bacterial counts exceeding the maximum permitted limit on March 14 and April 17, of which the total bacterial counts exceeded the maximum permitted limit by 20 per cent to 11.5 times.

Customs again reminds members of the public to observe the following tips when purchasing and using surgical masks:

- Check if there is any dirt on the masks and stop using those with stains or odd smells;
- Pay attention to the proper way of using surgical masks;
- Change surgical masks at a suitable time;
- Store surgical masks in dry places; and
- Purchase surgical masks at reputable retail shops.

The "Guardian" operation has been running for over four months to date. More than 4 900 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 33 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the CGSO and the Trade Descriptions Ordinance.

