

Hong Kong's COVID-19 activity shows signs of decline from its peak but is expected to remain high in near term

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) today (May 29) said that there are signs that the level of COVID-19 activity in Hong Kong has started to decline from its peak. However, it is expected to remain at a relatively high level in the near future. High-risk individuals, especially the elderly and those with underlying illnesses, should not take this lightly and should receive a free booster dose in a timely manner to minimise the risk of serious complications or death after infection.

According to the latest surveillance data (as of the week ending May 24), both the viral load of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from sewage surveillance and the test positivity rate of respiratory samples have begun to decline in the past week. Among them, the percentage of respiratory samples testing positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus decreased from 13.80 per cent in the previous week (May 11 to 17) to 11.12 per cent. For sewage surveillance, the per capita viral load of SARS-CoV-2 virus decreased from around 770 000 copy/litre to 500 000 copy/litre during the same period. Besides, the consultation rate of COVID-19 cases at general out-patient clinics and sentinel private medical practitioner clinics also dropped.

"COVID-19 has become an endemic disease with cyclical patterns. Epidemiological data from local and other regions around the world show that there are generally periodic upsurges in the COVID-19 activity level approximately every six to nine months. Hong Kong has experienced an upsurge in COVID-19 cases since April this year, more than half a year after the last increase in July and August of last year. The current active period is expected. Although the activity of COVID-19 has started to decline, with reference to previous data, we expect that it will remain at a relatively high level in the short term, and will take a month or two to gradually decline to a lower level," said the Controller of the CHP, Dr Edwin Tsui.

"Genetic analysis showed that XDV and its descendent lineages (mainly NB.1.8.1) have become the dominating variant strains in Hong Kong. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently assigned NB.1.8.1 as one of the "Variants under Monitoring". The WHO suggested that the global public health risk posed by NB.1.8.1 was low. There is currently no evidence that NB.1.8.1 will cause more severe diseases than previously dominating variant strains (such as JN.1 and XBB as well as their descendent lineages). As XDV (including NB.1.8.1) is a JN.1-related variant, the COVID-19 vaccines currently used in Hong Kong can effectively prevent infection and severe disease," Dr Tsui said.

The CHP has recorded six severe paediatric cases (no fatal cases) related to COVID-19 so far this year. Among which, two have underlying illnesses and four have not received the initial dose of the COVID-19

vaccine. These cases showed that even children who have been in good past health may experience severe complications from COVID-19 infection.

"Severe COVID-19 cases primarily affect the elderly and children, and those with underlying illnesses. Existing local and overseas scientific data has fully proved that the COVID-19 vaccine is effective in minimising the risk of severe disease or death after infection. Therefore, I remind members of the public who have not received the initial dose of the COVID-19 vaccine (including infants and children) to get vaccinated at appropriate times. Moreover, pregnant women getting the COVID-19 vaccine not only can reduce the risk of hospitalisation and death, the antibodies in their bodies can also be passed to the foetus and the breastfed babies through the umbilical cord or breast milk respectively, providing protection to infants aged below six months who cannot receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Those at high risk (particularly the elderly and persons with underlying illnesses), should receive a booster dose as soon as possible," Dr Tsui added.

Apart from vaccination, the public should maintain stringent personal, environmental and hand hygiene at all times to minimise the risk of contracting COVID-19 and other respiratory infectious diseases. When respiratory symptoms appear, one should wear a surgical mask, consider avoiding going to work or school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly.

For the latest surveillance data, members of the public can refer to the CHP's weekly [COVID-19 & Flu Express](#). For more information on vaccination, please refer to the [COVID-19 Vaccination Programme webpage](#).