

LCQ22: COVID-19 Vaccination Programme

Following is a question by Professor the Hon Chan Wing-kwong and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (February 26):

Question:

To safeguard public health, the Government is implementing a territory-wide COVID-19 Vaccination Programme (the Vaccination Programme) free of charge for eligible persons. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of received vaccination doses and vaccination rates under the Vaccination Programme in the past two years; among them, the respective numbers of received doses and vaccination rates for initial and booster doses;

(2) of the respective numbers of received booster doses and booster vaccination rates in the past two years for various priority groups eligible for free booster vaccination, i.e. (i) older adults aged 50 or above (including those living in residential care homes), (ii) persons aged 18 to 49 years with underlying comorbidities, (iii) persons with immunocompromising conditions aged six months and above, (iv) pregnant women, and (v) healthcare workers;

(3) of the financial expenditure incurred by the Government in implementing the Vaccination Programme in each of the past two years;

(4) whether it knows the number of deaths due to COVID-19 infection in the past two years, and the number of COVID-19 vaccine doses received by the deceased prior to their death; and

(5) since the restoration of normalcy after the pandemic, what measures the Government has put in place to promote COVID-19 vaccination among the public, particularly high-risk groups, in order to effectively prevent COVID-19?

Reply:

President,

With the ever evolvement of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the prevention and treatment capacities of the local healthcare system and society as a whole have been enhanced significantly. COVID-19 has been managed as an upper respiratory tract illness by the Government since early 2023. Despite this, the World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that high-risk persons should receive COVID-19 booster doses at appropriate times to lower the risks of serious illness and death. With reference to the recommendations from the WHO as well as the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases and the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases (JSC) under the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health (DH), the Government is

currently providing the JN.1 lineage COVID-19 vaccines for eligible individuals aged six months or above.

As the vast majority of the public had past COVID-19 infection, according to the recommendation of the JSC, the Government has simplified the arrangements for initial vaccination, which replaced the previous three-dose definition for initial vaccination, since August 19, 2024. Under the new arrangement, in general, persons aged five or above (regardless of their history of infection with COVID-19) are considered to have completed initial vaccination by receiving one dose of mRNA COVID-19 vaccine. Persons aged six months to four years who have been infected with COVID-19 are considered to have completed initial vaccination by receiving one dose of mRNA COVID-19 vaccine. For those who have not been infected, they should receive two or three doses of vaccines in accordance with the recommendations of the vaccine manufacturers to be considered as having completed initial vaccination. In addition, the JSC recommended that high-risk priority groups, including individuals aged 50 or above and those with chronic diseases, should receive a booster dose at least six months after the last dose or COVID-19 infection (whichever is later), regardless of the number of doses received previously, in order to enhance protection.

Between 2023 and 2024, the activity level of SARS-CoV-2 virus followed a cyclical pattern, with minor waves occurring every four to six months. For example, the virus became active in early January 2024 with a positive rate of 6.8 per cent among respiratory specimens, peaking at 16.8 per cent in early March before decreasing to lower levels in June. The subsequent wave peaked at 9.06 per cent from late July to early August before subsiding. As of the week ending on February 8, 2025, the positive rate for COVID-19 testing remained at a low level of 0.46 per cent. Regarding the monitoring of variant strains, the JN.1 and its descendant lineages were the most prevalent variant strains.

The reply, in consultation with the DH and the Hospital Authority (HA), to the question regarding the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme raised by Professor the Hon Chan Wing-kwong is as follows:

(1) As at January 31, 2025, a total of more than 21 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines were administered under the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme. In 2023 and 2024, about 586 000 and about 222 000 doses were administered respectively. The definition for initial vaccination was updated since August 19, 2024. Starting from August 19, 2024, about 61 000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines were administered, including about 1 000 initial doses and about 60 000 booster doses. The estimated proportion of people that completed COVID-19 initial vaccination in Hong Kong is about 94 per cent.

(2) According to the recommendation of the JSC, since April 20, 2023, citizens have to declare themselves as priority groups to continue receiving free boosters. Therefore, the DH only maintains records of the actual number of vaccinations for individuals who declared themselves as belonging to a priority group on or after April 20, 2023.

From April 20, 2023 to 2024, around 342 000 booster doses of COVID-19

vaccines were administered for the self-reported priority groups. The vaccination figures broken down by the priority groups are as follows:

Self-reported priority group	Number of booster doses administered
Persons aged 50 or above and adult residents living in residential care homes	332 000
Healthcare workers	6 000
Persons aged 18 to 49 years with underlying comorbidities	3 000
Persons aged six months or above with immunocompromising conditions	1 000
Pregnant women	Less than 400
Total	Around 342 000

Note: Due to the lack of data on the population size of some priority groups, the vaccination rate cannot be calculated.

(3) The expenditure figures of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 (as at January 31, 2025) were \$230 million and \$124 million respectively.

(4) According to the data of the Deaths Registries, a total of 2 944 cases died of COVID-19 between January 2023 and December 2024, with over 98 per cent involving adults aged 50 or above, and among them, nearly 80 per cent had not received COVID-19 vaccination within six months prior to death. In addition, among those fatal cases with available information, nearly 90 per cent had history of known chronic diseases. The data showed that timely booster doses of COVID-19 vaccines for high-risk persons help lower the risk of severe illness and death.

(5) Since the launch of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, the Government has set up an online booking system which is available around the clock. Members of the public may make a booking through the system for COVID-19 vaccination at Private Clinic COVID-19 Vaccination Stations, Children Community Vaccination Centre, designated general out-patient clinics under the HA, as well as designated Student Health Service Centres, Maternal and Child Health Centres or Elderly Health Centres under the DH. The Government also provides vaccination for adult residents of residential care homes (RCHs) for the elderly and RCHs for persons with disabilities through outreach services under the Residential Care Home Vaccination Programme.

The Centre for Health Protection has been disseminating health messages on prevention of communicable diseases and maintaining personal and environmental hygiene through various channels, such as TV and radio announcements in the public interest, social media, printed media, Health Education Infoline, media and radio interviews, advertisements on public transport, outdoor and digital media. The messages also cover the COVID-19

Vaccination Programme. The Centre for Health Protection will continue to strengthen relevant publicity and health education through various channels. The DH has also encouraged and assisted the elderly in the community, especially elderly singletons, to receive necessary vaccines including COVID-19 vaccine via district networks, such as District Services and Community Care Teams. District Elderly Community Centres and Neighbourhood Elderly Centres under the Social Welfare Department, District Health Centres (DHCs) and DHC Expresses under the Health Bureau, as well as Elderly Health Centres under the DH, will also provide assistance to the elderly in need to make online bookings for COVID-19 vaccination.

In addition, the HA provides COVID-19 vaccination services at its 18 designated general out-patient clinics, 13 designated specialist out-patient clinics, the Children Community Vaccination Centre located at the Hong Kong Children's Hospital, as well as its staff vaccination depots. The HA also encourages eligible long-stay patients to receive COVID-19 vaccination to reduce the risk of severe cases and fatalities.