

Suspected MERS cases reported

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (March 16) reported two suspected cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and again urged the public to pay special attention to safety during travel, taking due consideration of the health risks in the places they visit. The cases are detailed below:

Sex	Male	Male
Age	27	29
Affected area involved	Dubai, United Arab Emirates	Jordan
High-risk exposure	Nil	Nil
Hospital	Queen Mary Hospital	Queen Elizabeth Hospital
Condition	Stable	Stable
MERS-Coronavirus preliminary test result	Pending	Pending

Separately, the CHP reported that the suspected MERS case pending results yesterday (March 15), upon preliminary testing, tested negative for MERS Coronavirus (MERS-CoV).

"Travellers to the Middle East should avoid going to farms, barns or markets with camels; avoid contact with sick persons and animals, especially camels, birds or poultry; and avoid unnecessary visits to healthcare facilities. We strongly advise travel agents organising tours to the Middle East to abstain from arranging camel rides and activities involving direct contact with camels, which are known risk factors for acquiring MERS-CoV," a spokesman for the CHP said.

Locally, the CHP's surveillance with public and private hospitals, with practising doctors and at boundary control points is firmly in place. Inbound travellers and members of the public who recently visited the Middle East and developed relevant symptoms within 14 days will be classified as suspected MERS cases. They will be taken to public hospitals for isolation and management until their specimens test negative for MERS-CoV.

Travellers to affected areas should maintain vigilance, adopt appropriate health precautions and take heed of personal, food and environmental hygiene. The public may visit the MERS pages of the [CHP](#) and its [Travel Health Service](#), MERS statistics in [affected areas](#), the CHP's [Facebook Page](#) and [YouTube Channel](#), and the World Health Organization's [latest news](#) for more information and health advice. Tour leaders and tour guides operating overseas tours are advised to refer to the CHP's [health advice on MERS](#).

Updated blood donation precautionary measures in response to COVID-19

The following is issued on behalf of the Hospital Authority:

The Hong Kong Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service (BTS) has established a policy to ensure blood safety. The BTS regularly reviews the blood donation arrangements for prospective donors who return from areas with potential risks of infectious diseases. In response to the latest developments regarding COVID-19, the spokesperson for the BTS today (March 16) announced the following precautionary measures to be implemented with immediate effect.

- Members of the public who have travelled outside Hong Kong to any destination recently should be deferred from blood donations for 28 days from the date of arrival.
- Members of the public who have had close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 should be deferred from blood donations for 28 days.
- Members of the public confirmed as having COVID-19 will be deferred for 180 days following a complete recovery.

The above arrangements have been made after careful assessment and with thorough consideration of the associated risks of blood safety by the Hospital Authority (BTS) Expert Panel on Blood and Blood Products Safety. The Expert Panel will work closely with relevant departments to monitor the latest developments and to review related measures in a timely manner. Meanwhile, all blood donors are reminded that if they develop symptoms of fever, respiratory tract infection or pneumonia after a blood donation, they should seek medical advice and inform the healthcare staff of the BTS as soon as possible during office hours at 2710 1201, 2710 1243 or 2710 1298. Outside office hours please call 2710 1210 or 2710 1234.

FS responds on the reduction of countercyclical capital buffer

The Financial Secretary, Mr Paul Chan, today (March 16) welcomed the reduction of the countercyclical capital buffer (CCyB) for Hong Kong to 1.0 per cent by the Monetary Authority.

Facing the impact of the epidemic outbreak and the pressure of the global economic downturn, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong have imminent financing needs. Lowering the CCyB will release some \$500 billion in capital, providing banks with a larger buffer to support the local economy as well as hard-hit sectors and individuals.

"I call on the banking sector to provide full support to SME borrowers while complying with their own credit policies and risk management principles. This includes handling enterprises' loan applications with a supportive, accommodating and flexible attitude at full speed, and providing the option of loan restructuring for those in need, so as to assist them in overcoming the challenges," Mr Chan said.

"I announced one-off measures totalling over \$120 billion in the latest Budget, with a view to providing multi-pronged support to the economy and enterprises. Amongst the measures, I proposed the introduction of a concessionary low-interest loan with a 100 per cent government guarantee to address the financing needs of SMEs facing difficulties. The Hong Kong Mortgage Corporation Limited has started its discussion with banks and the relevant preparatory work. The scheme will be discussed by the Commerce and Industry Panel of the Legislative Council tomorrow (March 17), before submission to the Finance Committee for approval. It will be formally launched in April subject to approval within this month. The Hong Kong Monetary Authority will continue to co-ordinate the close liaison between the banking sector and the trade, with a view to providing suitable assistance to SMEs," Mr Chan added.

Separately, the global financial market has been tumbling due to worldwide uncertainty. Mr Chan emphasised that all financial regulators will continue to monitor the market situation closely through a cross-market co-ordinated approach, and ensure the normal and orderly operation of the currency, stock, futures and derivatives markets. Where necessary, additional enhancement measures will be implemented to safeguard the financial stability of Hong Kong.

In addition, Mr Chan appealed to investors to manage their own risks properly and make careful investment decisions.

Coin Collection Programme

The following is issued on behalf of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) today (March 16) announces a new service schedule of the two Coin Carts under the Coin Collection Programme, for the period of April 13 up to June 21. The schedule and other details of the Programme are shown on the HKMA webpage (coincollection.hkma.gov.hk).

Since the launch of the Programme in October 2014, the two Coin Carts have completed 29 cycles of serving the 18 districts on February 9, 2020. The Carts had carried out 697 000 transactions, collecting 563 million coins with a total face value of HK\$ 817 million during the period. The collected coins are re-circulated to meet demand.

The Coin Carts provide service at locations that are convenient to the public without affecting the normal flow of traffic and pedestrians. Locations that have suitable power supply facilities, such as the Leisure and Cultural Services Department mobile library service locations, are preferred so as to reduce the need for using the Coin Carts' own stand-by generators. This makes the Programme more environmentally friendly. In selecting the service locations, the HKMA has taken into consideration comments and suggestions given by district councils and members of the public; and has consulted the Transport Department and the Hong Kong Police Force as necessary.

The two Coin Carts collect coins from members of the public in the 18 districts of Hong Kong on a rotating basis. Under normal circumstances each Coin Cart will stay at a location for a week, subject to availability of the parking space and the maintenance schedule of the Cart. Service hours are from 10am to 7pm. Each vehicle is equipped with two coin counting machines and operational staff will be present to provide assistance. An electrical wheelchair lift is available for use. Users can choose to exchange coins for banknotes or adding value to their stored value facilities, such as Octopus Cards or e-wallets (including AlipayHK, Octopus 0! ePay, Tap&Go, TNG Wallet and WeChat Pay). There is also a Community Chest donation box inside each vehicle. The coin collection service is free of charge.

The HKMA will review the Programme from time and time; and will regularly update the service schedule to give advance notice to the public.

Anti-epidemic Fund begins disbursing subsidies to live marine fish wholesale traders

A spokesman for the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) said today (March 16) that the Government is providing subsidies to live marine fish wholesale traders operating in the wholesale fish markets of the Fish Marketing Organization under the Anti-epidemic Fund to assist the trade to tackle the financial difficulties arising from the COVID-19 epidemic. The disbursement of approved subsidies to the traders of the first batch of successful applications has started.

Twenty applications have been approved involving subsidies of \$4,000,000. The department will process the remaining applications as soon as possible in order to provide assistance to eligible live marine fish wholesale traders.

For more details, please contact the department at 2150 7103, or view the department's website (www.afcd.gov.hk).