

Scientific Committees under CHP publish consensus interim recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines

The Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases (SCVPD) and the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases (SCEZD) under the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health (DH) (JSC) convened a meeting today (March 18), joined by the Chief Executive's expert advisory panel (EAP), to provide recommendations on use of COVID-19 vaccination for those with previous COVID-19 infection and discuss the existing evidence on COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness against different variants.

During the meeting, published data of vaccines undergoing phase four clinical studies were examined. It was noted that the effectiveness of the vaccines against symptomatic COVID-19 cases in real life situation is comparable to the findings in phase three trials and they are also found effective against COVID-19 related hospitalisations and deaths. Rapid deployment of the vaccines should be enabled to achieve a high level of coverage as soon as practicable.

Recommendation of COVID-19 vaccination for those with previous COVID-19 infection was discussed in the meeting. Previous COVID-19 infection usually confers immunity for at least six to nine months for majority of patients. There is accumulating evidence showing that those previously infected with COVID-19 would be further protected by one dose of mRNA vaccines. After receiving one dose of mRNA vaccine, these persons may experience more systemic side effects, such as fatigue, headache, chills, muscle pain, fever and joint pain, when compared to those without prior infection. People who wish to receive mRNA vaccine should wait for at least 90 days after discharge from previous infection. There is currently no data on the role of inactivated vaccines.

Emerging variants are constant threats to the protection conferred by COVID-19 vaccines. The meeting also discussed the existing evidence on COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness against different variants. There were several variants circulating globally, including the variants first emerged in the United Kingdom (B.1.1.7), in the South Africa (B.1.351) and in Brazil (P.1). In general, studies have shown that the existing vaccines works well against the non-variant. The effectiveness data against variants differ by vaccines. The Fosun Pharma/BioNTech vaccine (BNT162b2) is effective against B.1.1.7 and P.1, but is less effective against B.1.351. There is currently limited efficacy data of CoronaVac developed by Sinovac Biotech (Hong Kong) Limited against variants. The company is currently implementing a large scale study in Brazil and more efficacy data against variants will be available. The vaccine developed by AstraZeneca, in collaboration with the University of

Oxford (AZD1222) is effective against B.1.1.7 but is ineffective against the B.1.351 variant. Achieving a high COVID-19 vaccination coverage as soon as possible and continuing robust non-pharmaceutical interventions to minimise the chance of viral transmission would be a priority goal in controlling the epidemic and preventing the emergence of variants.

The meeting also deliberated the impact of vaccine delivery on the public health strategy of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and considered that at the current phase of the vaccination programme there is some preliminary evidence on the effects of vaccination on preventing transmission and challenges posed by the emergence of COVID-19 variants.

The World Health Organization and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control consider that proof of vaccination should not cause international travellers to be exempted from complying with travel risk reduction measures.

Hong Kong has a very stringent testing and quarantine requirement for inbound travellers. From December 2020 till mid-March 2021, among the over 400 imported cases reported in Hong Kong, about four per cent were detected beyond 14 days of quarantine. Among these imported cases, over 90 cases were detected to have variant strains, of which, more than 60 per cent were asymptomatic at the time of specimen collection. It is essential to maintain the current testing and quarantine measures.

The meeting agreed that the combination of NPIs with vaccination will allow for maximum protection against the virus. There is a need to continue public health strategies on NPIs, including social distancing, good hand hygiene and wearing a mask in public, to reduce the risk of transmission.

NPIs should continue to be followed by vaccinated individuals, as well as those who have not yet been vaccinated. Any changes to NPIs should be carefully monitored, but can be reviewed with increasing vaccination coverage.

Details of the interim recommendation are available at CHP website www.chp.gov.hk/en/static/24008.html.

Working Group invites suppliers to provide information on air purifiers meeting specified specifications applicable to catering business

â€‹The Secretary for Food and Health yesterday (March 17) stipulated a

requirement on air change or air purifiers to be complied with in dine-in restaurants in the directions in relation to catering business under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F). The Working Group, established for the smooth implementation of the requirement, held its first meeting today (March 18) to discuss the future work plan. It invited device suppliers to provide information on their air purifiers that meet the specified specifications. This will help catering premises operators and ventilation contractors in complying with the requirement to register on or before April 30.

The Chairman of the Working Group, Professor Yuen Pak-leung, said, "With members' extensive professional expertise and experience, I hope that the Working Group will put forward practicable recommendations to the Government, with a view to assisting in the smooth compliance of the requirement by catering premises operators and ventilation contractors, so as to protect the health of staff, customers and the public, and to fortify the public's confidence in patronising catering premises."

A spokesman for the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) said that at today's meeting, members of the Working Group exchanged professional views on air changes and air purifiers, and discussed in detail the upcoming work. One of the important tasks of the Working Group is to allow, in an open, transparent, fair and impartial manner, suppliers of air purifiers that meet the specified specifications to provide information within a reasonable time, so that the Working Group could consolidate the information for reference by catering premises operators and ventilation contractors.

The Working Group invites suppliers (including manufacturers, authorised agents, online shopping websites or physical retail shops) who are interested to provide information on their air purifiers that meet the specified specifications before 5pm on March 28. They are also required to submit information on the models and respective manuals of the air purifiers, as well as filling in the information sought in specified form on the FEHD's website (www.fehd.gov.hk/english/forms/air_purifier_restaurant.html), to the Secretariat of the Working Group by mail (45/F, Queensway Government Offices, 66 Queensway, Hong Kong) or email (wg-ventilation@fehd.gov.hk).

The Working Group will consolidate the information provided by the suppliers as soon as possible and will announce details about air purifiers meeting relevant specifications in early April or before for reference by catering premises operators and ventilation contractors.

In addition, the Working Group will arrange meetings with representatives of the catering trade and ventilation contractor businesses as soon as practicable to listen to their views and respond to their queries, and will formulate specific guidelines on matters related to air change or air purifiers at an appropriate time.

According to the latest directions issued by the Secretary for Food and Health on ventilation requirements, the air change per hour at seating areas of dine-in catering premises must reach six. If unable to do so, the premises

may install air purifiers that meet the specified specifications in the seating area according to the on-the-ground situation (including the site condition) and the manufacturer manual as an alternative. The Government listed in the Gazette three types of air purifiers, namely high-efficiency particulate arrestance filter (HEPA) cum ultraviolet-C (UV-C) devices, HEPA devices and UV-C devices as choices. Catering premises must comply with the specified requirement on air change or air purifiers on or before April 30, as well as to register on the FEHD's website and display a notice at the entrance of the premises.

Statistics for COVID-19 Vaccination Programme

The COVID-19 Vaccination Programme has been implemented for 21 days since February 26.

In the past 24 hours ending at 8pm today (March 18), the following figures were recorded:

(i) About 11 800 persons received their first dose of Sinovac vaccine, including about 8 300 persons vaccinated at eight Community Vaccination Centres (CVCs) and about 3 100 persons at private doctors and clinics participating in the programme; and

(ii) About 10 800 persons received their first dose of BioNTech vaccine at 19 CVCs.

(iii) A total of about 22 600 persons received their first dose of vaccine.

The overall percentage of people who have received Sinovac vaccine at eight CVCs today is about 83 per cent, while the overall percentage of people who have received BioNTech vaccine at 19 CVCs today is about 94 per cent.

So far, a cumulative total of about 276 600 persons have received their first vaccination dose (Annex 1), with about 201 500 persons receiving Sinovac vaccine and about 75 100 persons receiving BioNTech vaccine.

As of 8pm today, about 9 600 persons had reserved their first and second doses of the Sinovac vaccine online in the past 24 hours, while about 18 600 persons had reserved their first and second doses of the BioNTech vaccine online.

In the past 24 hours ending at 0000 hours today, there were 12 cases of ambulance transfer to hospital. Among them, 11 cases were discharged and one case was admitted for observation (Annex 2).

Lei Tung community testing centre in Southern District to commence service tomorrow

â€‹To further facilitate members of the public to undergo COVID-19 testing, the Government will set up at Lei Tung Community Hall in Southern District an additional community testing centre which will commence service at 2pm tomorrow (March 19). There will be a total of 21 community testing centres across the city to provide testing services for the public.

The new Lei Tung community testing centre in Southern District will operate until end of April 2021 tentatively. Community testing centres provide self-paid testing services for the public at a more affordable price to serve general community or private purposes such as certification for travelling or work. The price of concerned testing services is capped at \$240. The Government would also, as and when necessary (such as in situations with higher risks of community transmission), conduct necessary testing for targeted groups, specified persons or other citizens at the testing centres for public health reasons on a need basis.

Community testing centres have come into service in phases since November 15, 2020. As at March 16, 2021, these centres in various districts had provided a total of around 1.99 million tests, of which over 1 070 samples were tested preliminarily positive (0.05 per cent) and had been referred to the Centre for Health Protection for confirmatory tests and follow-up.

A Government spokesman said, "The Government has been refining its anti-epidemic strategies in accordance with the development of the epidemic, including conducting large-scale COVID-19 testing for groups of different risks under the three key principles of 'compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis' with a view to achieving 'early identification, early isolation and early treatment', and cutting the transmission chains in the community as far as possible."

â€‹ "Having regard to the recent increase in risk of transmission and infection in different premises or groups and the implementation of strengthened anti-epidemic measures for the resumption of various economic and social activities, the Government encourages or requires people of various groups to undergo testing. The supply of testing services is being further enhanced to cope with the increasing demand for testing so as to meet anti-epidemic goals and facilitate the public. Community testing centres provide services not only for those who undergo testing voluntarily at a more affordable price, but also for persons who are subject to compulsory testing

and targeted groups, thus enabling the Government to meet unexpected testing demand in a more efficient and flexible manner and to strengthen disease prevention and control in Hong Kong."

The community testing centres provide specimen collection services (using combined nasal and throat swabs) and COVID-19 testing services for all asymptomatic individuals holding valid Hong Kong identity cards, Hong Kong birth certificates or other valid identity documents (including Hong Kong residents and non-Hong Kong residents). The centres are open daily from 8am to 1.30pm and from 2.30pm to 8pm. Deep cleaning and disinfection would be conducted when they close in the afternoon and at night.

Booking and walk-in services are available. Members of the public only need to provide simple personal information (including their name, number of valid identity document and phone number) on the 24-hour booking system (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en) to select the testing centre and time slot. The booking system will show the booking status of centres for the coming week, and members of the public can choose suitable time slots for testing. The testing centres would accord priority to provide service for individuals with advance bookings. Members of the public may also call the testing centres for enquiries on the availability of bookings or walk-in quotas before visiting the centres.

At present, persons of certain targeted groups (including employees of designated scheduled premise and catering businesses, construction site workers, school staff), local residents and staff subject to compulsory testing, as well as persons with "LeaveHomeSafe" COVID-19 exposure notification may receive free testing at community testing centres. They must register through the booking system (www.communitytest.gov.hk/en) for free testing service. Those without bookings will need to pay the testing fee. If necessary, targeted groups who underwent testing may make another booking. The Government will regularly review the coverage and frequency of targeted group testing with reference to the latest epidemic risk assessment.

The Government spokesman said, "To reduce the risk of virus transmission, testing agencies provide various means of contactless payment. The Government encourages citizens using self-paid service to reduce or avoid using cash as a means of payment as far as possible."

Participants, upon receiving self-paid testing service, with a negative result will receive a test report for a COVID-19 nucleic acid test within 24 hours. Persons subject to compulsory testing and persons of targeted groups who are users of free testing service will be informed of test results by SMS notifications through their mobile phones. Those who are tested positive as confirmed by the Department of Health (DH) will receive calls from the DH to arrange for isolation and treatment in public hospitals in accordance with established procedures.

The locations, hotlines and means of contactless payment of community testing centres in various districts are at the Annex. The Government reminds the public that they can undergo COVID-19 testing through various means. For details on other testing means than community testing centres, please refer

to the following webpage: www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/early-testing.html. Person who has symptoms should seek medical attention immediately and should not attend the community testing centres.

THB's response to media enquiries about franchised bus fare adjustment

In response to media enquiries about franchised bus fare adjustment, the Transport and Housing Bureau today (March 18) said that all the franchised bus operators are facing severe financial difficulties in view of the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic and rising operating costs.

To help the franchised bus sector tide over the difficult time, the Government has earlier implemented a series of relief measures under the Anti-epidemic Fund, including the Employment Support Scheme, fuel subsidy, and reimbursement of regular repair and maintenance costs and insurance premium. Under the Employment Support Scheme, the Government provided time-limited financial support to bus companies for their payment of salaries, with a view to preserving employment opportunities of nearly 20 000 employees. With the gradual cessation of these relief measures by end 2020, franchised bus operators are facing financial cliff edge even though they have already implemented measures to increase revenue and reduce expenditure.

In approving the fare adjustment applications of the franchised bus operators, the Executive Council has taken into account a host of factors, including public affordability and acceptability, to ensure the sound operation of normal bus services and to minimise the impact on the livelihood of employees of the operators.

In adjusting the fares of individual routes, the Government has strived to minimise the impact on the public through applying the mitigation effect of the Franchised Bus Toll Exemption Fund. In addition, the Government will further extend the expiry of the temporary special measure under the Public Transport Fare Subsidy Scheme (i.e. providing a subsidy amounting to one-third of the monthly expenses in excess of \$200) from June 30 till December 31, and temporarily raise the monthly subsidy cap from \$400 to \$500 during the period from April 1 to December 31, with a view to further alleviating commuters' fare burdens.