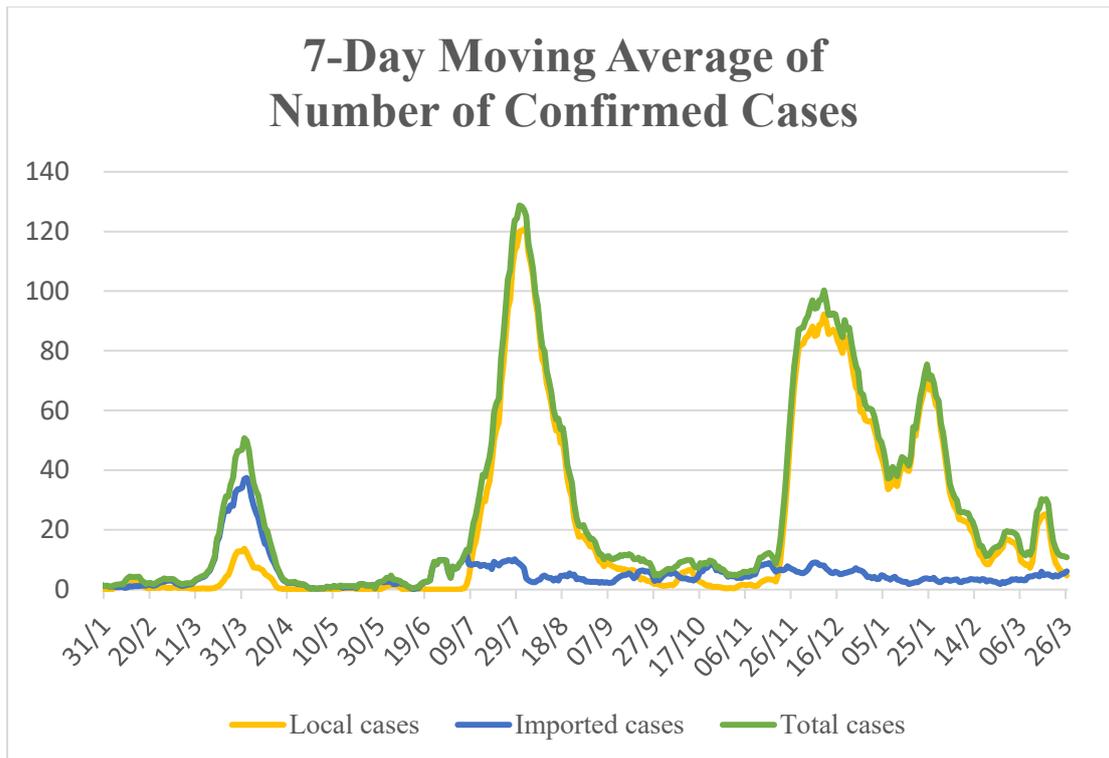


Fighting the Epidemic for Fourteen Months Suppressing Rebounds With All-out Efforts

In the past month, the epidemic situation in Hong Kong has become volatile again due to a “restaurant cluster” and a “gym cluster”, resulting in two rebounds in the number of confirmed cases, which had previously subsided. It is gratifying to note though that by continuously enhancing our anti-epidemic measures, including carrying out testing and tracing of close contacts swiftly and intensively, we have successfully contained the spread of virus in a short period of time with the number of cases quickly coming down to low levels in recent days, without needing to close any of the re-opened businesses and premises again. We are also taking forward the vaccination programme progressively and hope that members of the public can participate in the programme more actively so as to build an immune barrier for Hong Kong as soon as possible.

How the epidemic has developed

The fourth wave of epidemic which began in late November has lasted for nearly four months and we are still not able to achieve “zero infection” of local cases. From late February to early March, there was a “restaurant cluster” involving 57 cases. A “gym cluster” also broke out in early mid-March which has led to more than 150 cases. Such cases point to the continued presence of transmission risks in the community.



We can see from the chart above that the “restaurant cluster” and “gym cluster” have caused two “small peaks” in the number of confirmed cases in the past month. Fortunately, according to the virus strain analysis conducted by a team at the University of Hong Kong, these cases could only be a continuation of the fourth wave of the epidemic. It is believed that no imported cases, particularly virus variants, have entered the community. Our analysis of the situation finds that: first, this wave of the epidemic is obviously more difficult to contain than the two waves that emerged last year, and all along we have not been able to completely cut the transmission chains in the community; second, our measures to prevent importation of cases have been successful, and the virus variants that are plaguing the world have not entered the local community; third, although we have required the staff of a number of premises (including restaurants and gyms where the outbreaks occurred) to undergo testing regularly, we cannot rule out the possibility that some people may get infected in-between the tests or even lead to cluster outbreaks; fourth, as we cannot suspend social activities indefinitely and members of the public cannot be subject to prolonged restrictions on social

contacts, we should continue to adopt measures that have proven to be effective and focus on preventing large scale outbreaks. On the last point, compared to the “singing and dancing cluster” (involving more than 700 cases) which led to the fourth wave of the epidemic, the “restaurant cluster” (involving 57 cases) and “gym cluster” (involving over 150 cases) were contained in a relatively short period of time and have not led to even larger outbreaks.

Anti-epidemic efforts

Our virus testing efforts have been further strengthened over the past month. Owing to the extensive issuance of compulsory testing notices on residential buildings and workplaces where cases were found or sewage samples were tested positive, coupled with the continued implementation of other measures such as requiring staff of specified premises to undergo regular testing and reminding people at risk of infection to undergo testing through the “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile app, an average of 100 000 nucleic acid tests were conducted per day in March. We also continued to carry out “restriction-testing declaration” operations (i.e. “locking down” certain areas to require people within the area to undergo compulsory testing) when needed, and take enforcement actions on other compulsory testing notices.

The tracing of close contacts of confirmed cases has enabled us to contain the cluster outbreaks effectively. With strengthened manpower in contact tracing, and with more people downloading and using the “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile app, we have been able to trace close contacts more effectively. Take the tracing work of the “gym cluster” as an example of this. An average of 10 close contacts were identified for each confirmed case. Compared with the past cases where only two or three close contacts were identified in general, the effectiveness of tracing work has improved significantly. In this cluster alone, a total of about 1 500 people were sent to quarantine centres, while about 3 300 people (including the close contacts of close contacts) had to undergo virus testing.

As more close contacts are required to undergo quarantine and many of them are foreigners and children, some international media have questioned Hong Kong’s quarantine arrangements in the past month. I must stress that all of the anti-epidemic work of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government is done in accordance with the law, and that everybody is treated equally, with public health as our prime consideration. Hong Kong is one of the few places in the world that can arrange all infected persons (regardless of whether they show symptoms) to be isolated and treated in public hospitals and treatment facilities. Similarly, close contacts have to undergo quarantine at quarantine centres which are supported by medical posts or mobile medical teams. This is not only to prevent the spread of the virus in the community, but has also taken into account the living conditions in Hong Kong. In case involving of minors, the Department of Health generally allows one of the parents or a caretaker arranged by the parents to accompany them. Quarantine centres also provide a wide range of items, including cots, diapers for children and babies, baby food and snacks, etc. Milk warmers, disinfectors for milk bottles and refrigerators are also provided for parents upon request. On the premise of ensuring public health and safety, we will do our utmost to take care of the different needs of people under quarantine.

The major measures introduced are set out below chronologically (details of the vaccination programme are set out in the ensuing paragraphs):

Date	Event
February 27	As there were still quite a number of cases with unknown sources of infection, the Centre for Health Protection tightened the quarantine arrangements. Those who had close contact with confirmed cases with unknown sources of infection within seven days before the onset of symptoms are required to undergo quarantine. To strengthen testing for

	workplaces, if one or more confirmed cases are found in a workplace, it would be included in the compulsory testing notice.
March 4	In view of the recent infection cluster in eateries, the Government imposed more stringent infection control measures on catering business premises, including requiring them to dedicate staff for clearing used utensils and cleaning and disinfecting used tables and partitions, etc.
March 12	In view of the large-scale cluster outbreak in a fitness centre, the Government imposed more stringent infection control measures on fitness centres, including requiring any person within a fitness centre to wear a mask at all times.
March 26	The Education Bureau announced that after the schools' Easter holidays, all kindergartens, primary and secondary schools as well as tutorial schools could arrange more students to return to schools to attend face-to-face classes on a half-day basis, with the number of students capped at two-thirds of the total number of students of the schools.

Vaccination

Since the official launch of the large-scale vaccination programme on February 26 this year, as at March 26 night, about 430 000 people have received at least the first dose of vaccine, accounting for 6.6% per cent of persons aged 16 or above who are eligible for vaccination. I, together with the Secretaries of Departments and Directors of Bureaux as well as members of the Executive Council and the Legislative Council, have already received two doses of Sinovac vaccine. There are comprehensive support measures for vaccination in Hong Kong: a total of about 3.3 million doses of vaccine have arrived in Hong Kong to date; members of public may receive the jabs at 27

Community Vaccination Centres, 18 General Out-patient Clinics of the Hospital Authority and over 2 000 private doctors or clinics participating in the vaccination programme; vaccination priority groups have been expanded to cover Hong Kong citizens aged 30 or above; and an expert advisory group is available to closely monitor and assess the situation following vaccination. According to the experts' assessment, there is no direct causal association between the serious adverse events following vaccination and the administration of vaccine so far. The experts have also explained to the public and there is no need for people to worry. In addition, in view of the deviations in the packaging material of a small quantity of the Comirnaty vaccine, although they do not affect vaccine safety, we suspended the Comirnaty vaccination for members of the public on the request of the manufacturer, reflecting our prudence and the priority we accord to people's health.

Vaccination not only protects yourself, it protects your family members and friends. Many experts have already openly called on members of the public to get vaccinated, pointing out that it is necessary for a considerable proportion of people to receive vaccination to achieve 'herd immunity', thereby helping Hong Kong get through the epidemic. Nevertheless, given the present vaccination rate, I am afraid that it will take quite a long time to achieve the goal. To encourage more people to get vaccinated as early as possible, we have been actively studying whether social distancing measures can be further adjusted if a certain number of people are vaccinated, and we will discuss with other regions whether we can mutually provide travel convenience to vaccinated tourists.

The Sinovac vaccine and the Comirnaty vaccine that have been authorised for emergency use in Hong Kong require people to receive two doses to build up the due protection. I once again appeal to members of the public who have not yet been vaccinated to make bookings as soon as possible and those who have received the first dose should receive the second dose on schedule. The Government will announce the arrangement for the

administration of the second dose of Comirnaty vaccine as soon as possible.

Protect yourself and others, get vaccinated!

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
27 March 2021