

本署檔號 Our Ref. : (50) in DH CDB/8/82/1

30 August 2024

Dear Principal / Person-in-charge / Teacher,

Appeal to Stay Vigilant Against Communicable Diseases in the New School Year

As the new school year is going to commence, we would like to take this opportunity to urge you to maintain vigilance against potential spread of communicable diseases in the school setting.

Respiratory Infections

The latest surveillance data of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) showed that some respiratory pathogens remained active in the community. For children, laboratory surveillance data from the Hospital Authority (HA) over the past eight weeks (as of 24 August) revealed that the detection rate of *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* and Respiratory Syncytial Virus continued to increase. The latest rate reached 12% and 8% respectively, which have been increased from around 10% and 6% respectively compared to eight weeks ago but are in line with previous seasonal trends. Overall, rhinovirus/enterovirus continued to have the highest activity level amongst respiratory pathogens, accounting for more than 15% of the paediatric respiratory specimens received by the HA.

For COVID-19 and seasonal influenza, the activity of COVID-19 which had increased since June this year showed signs of decline recently. The overall influenza activity has remained at a low level since the end of influenza season in late July. However, with reference to the previous surveillance data, the CHP expected that activity of COVID-19 and seasonal influenza may increase at the end of the year and more school outbreaks will be reported.

To prevent respiratory infections, students / staff members should observe strict personal, hand and environmental hygiene at all times. Persons with respiratory symptoms, even if the symptoms are mild, should wear a surgical mask, refrain from work or attending classes at school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly. They should perform hand hygiene before wearing and after removing a mask.

Seasonal influenza vaccination (SIV) can provide protection against influenza infection, and lower the chance of serious complications and death brought about by infection. Parents are advised to arrange their children to receive SIV for better personal protection by participating in the SIV school outreach activities or visiting their family doctors in the new school year. Research studies have shown that SIV among children may potentially reduce school absenteeism. Parents should note that it takes about two weeks for the body to develop a sufficient level of antibodies to protect against influenza infection after vaccination, so they should receive vaccination early before the winter. The CHP has sent letters to all schools in Hong Kong through the Education Bureau



inviting schools to participate in the SIV school outreach vaccination programmes, and we look forward to hearing your positive responses.

Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease (HFMD)

HFMD is a common disease in children usually caused by enteroviruses such as coxsackie viruses and enterovirus 71 (EV71). In Hong Kong, the peak season for HFMD is usually from May to July and a smaller peak may be observed from October to December. This year, the HFMD activity recorded a slight increase between April and August. As of 29 August, the CHP recorded a total of 230 HFMD outbreaks this year, returning to the pre-pandemic level.

HFMD is mainly transmitted by contact with an infected person's nose or throat discharges, saliva, fluid from broken vesicles or stool, or after touching contaminated objects. As the viruses can easily spread through close person-to-person contact among students and a small peak usually occurs between October and December, it is expected that outbreaks of HFMD in schools will continue to occur after the start of the new school year.

To prevent the spread of HFMD within school settings, affected children should remain at home and refrain from attending school until they have completely recovered.

Dengue Fever (DF)

DF is an acute febrile viral illness with symptoms such as high fever, severe headache, pain behind the eyes, rash, muscle and joint pain. The disease is transmitted by mosquitoes. The symptoms of first infection are usually mild, but subsequent infections with dengue virus of other serotypes are more likely to result in severe dengue which may progress to circulatory failure, shock and even death. As of 29 August, the CHP recorded 54 DF cases this year, over 50% increase as compared with 34 cases recorded in the same period last year. Four locally infected cases have been recorded this year, while the others were all imported cases.

In view of the increase in imported DF cases this year coupled with detection of local DF cases, we would like to seek your help in the prevention of DF by taking part in mosquito control actions and adopting personal protective measures against mosquito bites.

The following preventive measures should be taken to prevent accumulation of stagnant water and eliminate mosquito breeding sites:

- Put all used cans and bottles into covered dustbins
- Change water for plants at least once a week, avoid using saucers underneath flower pots
- Cover all water containers, wells and water storage tanks tightly
- Keep all drains free from blockage
- Top up all defective ground surfaces to prevent the accumulation of stagnant water

Furthermore, the school management is advised to appoint designated staff for mosquito prevention and control in the school premises. Details are available from the guidelines published by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department: https://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/pestcontrol/library/pdf_pest_control/mosquito_school.pdf.

Other Considerations

To prevent outbreaks of communicable diseases, students/staff members who develop fever, acute respiratory symptoms, diarrhea, vomiting and rash etc. are strongly advised not to attend school and should seek medical advice. Besides, schools should take measures to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, e.g., remind students/staff members to observe good personal, food and environmental hygiene, avoid sharing clothing and slippers among students/children, etc. For details, please refer to the “Guidelines on Prevention of Communicable Diseases in Schools /Kindergartens /Kindergartens-cum-Child Care Centres /Child Care Centres” at:

https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/guidelines_on_prevention_of_communicable_diseases_in_schools_kindergartens_kindergartens_cum_child_care-centres_child_are_centres.pdf

If you suspect any outbreaks occurring in your institution, please report to the Central Notification Office of the CHP as early as possible for prompt epidemiological investigations (Tel: 2477 2772; Fax: 2477 2770; Email: diseases@dh.gov.hk). The CHP will give advice on the management of the cases and take appropriate control measures.

Moreover, schools should set up a mechanism for collecting personal particulars and contact information of students and staff members. They should also inform parents at the beginning of the new school year that the conditions and contact details of students/children will be released to the CHP and other relevant departments for disease control purpose when necessary.

For the latest information on communicable diseases, please visit the CHP's webpages below:

- Seasonal influenza
(<https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/14843.html>)
- HFMD and EV71 infection
(<https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/16354.html>)
- Dengue fever
(<https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/38847.html>)

Yours faithfully,



(Dr. Albert AU)
For Controller, Centre for Health Protection
Department of Health