

Hong Kong orders mandatory mask wearing to combat new virus wave

27 July 2020, by Su Xinqi



Hong Kongers were early adopters of widespread mask wearing, but now the government has made it compulsory even when outdoors, and limited gatherings to two people

Everyone in Hong Kong will have to wear masks in public from this week, authorities said Monday, as they unveiled the city's toughest social distancing measures yet to combat a new wave of coronavirus infections.

The ramped-up rules came as authorities revealed China would help officials build an emergency field [hospital](#) to help deal with a surge in patients.

"The epidemic situation in Hong Kong is remarkably severe," Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung told reporters, as he announced new measures including a ban on more than two people gathering in public and restaurants only being allowed to serve takeaway meals.

The densely packed financial hub was one of the first places hit by the [coronavirus](#) when it emerged from China, but initially had remarkable success in controlling the outbreak—helped in part by a health-conscious public embracing [face masks](#).

Local infections have soared over the last month, however, with piecemeal social distancing measures appearing to do little to stem a rising caseload.

More than 1,000 infections have been confirmed since early July—more than 40 percent of the total since the virus first hit the city in late January.

New daily infections have been above 100 for the last five days and the city of 7.5 million now has more than 2,700 infections with 20 fatalities, threatening to overwhelm hospitals.

Field hospital

Local authorities had previously announced plans to convert a large exhibition centre near the city's airport into a temporary field hospital.

Cheung said Beijing had agreed to help build the 2,000-bed facility, similar to those used in the central Chinese city of Wuhan where the deadly virus first emerged.

"These hospitals were built with marvellous speed in mainland China," Cheung said.



Restaurants in Hong Kong will only be allowed to serve takeout in a bid to tackle a new wave of coronavirus infections © 2020 AFP

Health officials have been scrambling to uncover the source of the latest outbreak.

Some have blamed exemptions from the usual 14-day quarantine which the government granted to "essential personnel", including cross-boundary truckers, air and sea crew and some manufacturing executives.

Because of its extensive air links and busy port, Hong Kong is a popular transit point for ships to change crews.

On Sunday, authorities tightened those rules.

Only vessels with freight destined for Hong Kong will be able to swap out personnel, but even they will not be allowed to mingle in public and must go straight to or from the airport, or stay in a designated quarantine venue.

Earlier this month the government shuttered a number of businesses—including bars, nightclubs and gyms—and banned restaurants from receiving dine-in customers in the evenings.

They also ordered people to wear masks while taking [public transport](#) or at indoor public venues.

The new rules mean that from Wednesday restaurants will only be allowed to serve takeout meals.

"I hope everyone can bear with this," Cheung told reporters.

No more than two people can gather in any [public place](#), although there are exemptions for those in the same household or those heading to work.

Cheung called on employers to allow staff to work from home, but so far authorities have resisted making such an order compulsory.

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