

HK to cull 1,000 hamsters

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Authorities take drastic action to stop pet shop cluster

HONG KONG: Health officials have decided to cull more than 1,000 hamsters as another Covid-19 case linked to a pet shop cluster was among the 18 new infections reported in the city on Tuesday.

In a media briefing, Leung Siu Fai, director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), said all pet shops that sell hamsters should immediately suspend operations and urged pet owners who bought hamsters after Dec 22 to turn them over to AFCD.

The department made the move after 11 samples taken from hamsters at the Little Boss pet shop in Causeway Bay tested preliminary positive for the virus.

Some environmental samples taken from a warehouse of the pet shop in Tai Po also had the coronavirus.

Health officials added that a 67-year-old woman who went to Little Boss and had direct contact with an infected employee also tested positive. They are tracking down the people behind at least 143 purchases made at the pet shop since Jan 7.

"We strongly appeal to the public. If you have bought a hamster at a pet shop in Hong Kong after Dec 22, do hand them over to AFCD – to ensure public health and take care of animal welfare," Leung said.

"Under no circumstances should you just dump your pet on the streets," he added.

AFCD will also immediately stop the importation of small mammals and review the quarantine requirements for their importation.

Leung said two batches of hamsters that arrived in Hong Kong on Dec 22 and Jan 7 were considered as high risk for infection.

Besides Little Boss, there are 34 other pet shops in the city that have around 1,000 hamsters. These hamsters and the 1,000 other small ani-



Cute carriers: AFCD officers removing small animals from the Little Boss pet store in Hong Kong. — Bloomberg

mals at Little Boss and its warehouse will have to be put down.

"You need to realise and understand that the hamsters already got infected. They're excreting the virus. The virus can infect other animals and also they can infect other hamsters and human beings," Thomas Sit Hon-chung, assistant director of AFCD, said at the same briefing.

"We don't want to cull the animals but we have to protect public health and animal health. We have no choice. We have to make a firm decision," he added.

Meanwhile, the 18 new Covid-19 cases on Tuesday included seven imported infections and 11 local

cases, said Chuang Shuk-kwan, head of the Centre for Health Protection's communicable disease branch.

One of the new local cases is the 23-year-old employee of Little Boss who tested positive for the Delta variant. Another involved a female retiree who went to Little Boss on Jan 8 to buy food for a hamster her daughter and another family member bought on Jan 4 at the shop.

"At that time, the infected employee assisted her and helped her settle the bill. They were both wearing masks and she stayed for 15 minutes," Chuang said.

"The patient's daughter is asymptomatic while her husband was

admitted to hospital and tested preliminarily positive."

The remaining positive cases were the nine relatives of a 43-year-old Pakistani housewife who returned to Hong Kong on Dec 20 and tested positive after her three-week quarantine at Silka Seaview Hotel in Yau Ma Tei.

Chuang also said that there were 10 patients who tested preliminarily positive, including a 26-year-old female kindergarten teacher whose infection had an unknown source.

The patient visited the K11 mall in Tsim Sha Tsui on Jan 10 and again on Jan 15, when she also shopped with friends at Harbour City. — China Daily/ANN