

Wuhan virus



Health advisory pamphlets being distributed at Changi Airport yesterday to passengers who had just disembarked from a flight from Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province. Those who are sick are urged to act responsibly by putting on a face mask to capture their respiratory droplets, and visiting a healthcare facility quickly to get checked. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Opt for surgical masks over N95 masks for protection: Experts

Masks sold out at some pharmacies but MOH eases fears about potential shortage

Toh Ting Wei

A top infectious disease expert and the Ministry of Health (MOH) have said that the public should not rely on N95 masks to guard against the Wuhan virus, even as they fly off the shelves at pharmacies.

Instead, surgical masks are more appropriate in this case, the expert and MOH said yesterday.

Surgical masks can help reduce the spread of the virus and it is more practical for the general public to use them.

They are meant to help block large-particle droplets and splatter from reaching the wearer's mouth and nose, and reduce exposure of the wearer's saliva and respiratory secretions to others.

N95 masks, which are tighter fitting, are designed to effectively filter airborne particles. They have been used in Singapore during haze situations.

National Centre for Infectious Diseases executive director Leo Yee Sin told The Straits Times that N95 masks are not recommended for

the general public. They are mainly used by medical staff.

The mask's design makes it difficult for people to breathe in if it is worn properly.

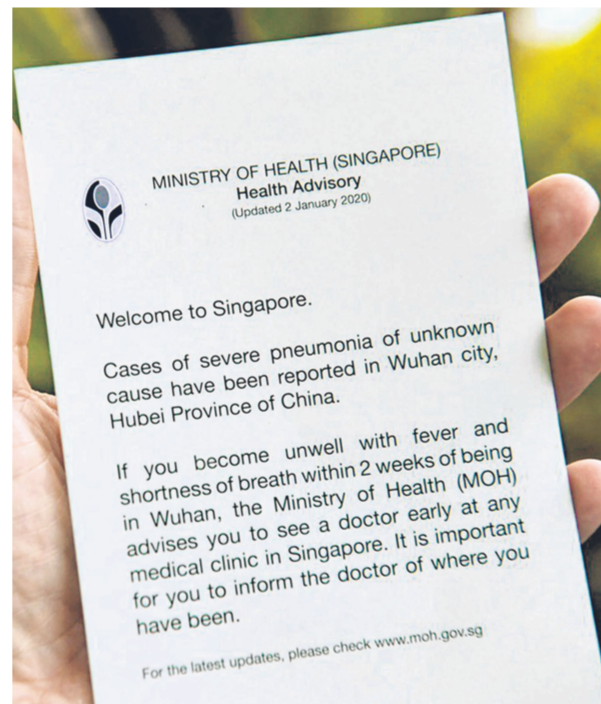
Prof Leo said: "If you find the N95 mask easy to breathe in and comfortable, you are wearing it wrong and it is no use... you think you are protected, but you are not."

Checks by The Straits Times at five pharmacies in Clementi and Bishan found that four had run out of N95 masks in the last few days, with three out of surgical masks.

At the Guardian pharmacy in Junction 8, at least five people within 20 minutes were seen buying boxes of N95 masks, with only one person buying surgical masks.

During a news conference yesterday, Ministry of Health group director of operations Koh Peng Keng said: "For the general public, if they fall sick, our advice is that they should wear a face mask, a normal surgical mask, and not use the N95 masks."

He also urged those who are sick to be socially responsible. They should put on a face mask to cap-



ture their respiratory droplets, and go to a healthcare facility quickly to get checked.

Mr Koh added that the Government is aware of increased sales of surgical and N95 face masks in the past two weeks.

But there is no need to worry about a potential shortage as the

Government usually has a stockpile of such items that can last for more than six months, he added.

Associate Professor Kenneth Mak, the designate director of medical services at the Health Ministry, said major retailers are working to procure more masks. Should they face shortages, the Government will step in to help, he said.

Guardian, one of the major pharmacies in Singapore with about 115 stores islandwide, said sales of masks have quadrupled in the last two weeks.

Meanwhile, sales of hand sanitisers and thermometers have tripled in the same period.

Watsons said it has seen more sales of masks, thermometers, Vitamin C and sanitisers recently, without elaborating.

Housewife Jennifer Tan, 60, who bought two boxes of N95 masks at the Guardian outlet in Junction 8 yesterday, said: "It seems quite serious with the human-to-human transmission overseas, so I decided to buy the masks. Once there is a case in Singapore, I will start wearing them."

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• Additional reporting by Melissa Heng

InBrief

Macau confirms first case of virus

HONG KONG • Macau's first confirmed case of the Wuhan virus involves a 52-year-old Wuhan businesswoman who reported to hospital on Tuesday, the Chinese territory's Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture Ao Leong Lu, vice-chairman of a committee set up to respond to the virus, said yesterday.

The woman took a high-speed train to the Chinese city of Zhuhai on Sunday, and then a shuttle bus to Macau. She had dinner with two friends, then went to a hotel and spent a long time in casinos.

She was in a stable condition in an isolation ward in hospital.

Meanwhile, the authorities announced that all staff in the city's bustling casinos had been ordered to wear face masks. REUTERS

Airline allows crew to wear masks

HONG KONG • Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific Airways will allow all crew members and front-line employees to wear surgical masks due to concerns over a new coronavirus, and said passengers to and from Wuhan could change or cancel flights for free through Feb 15.

The airline had said earlier that only cabin crew operating mainland China flights could wear masks, in response to the airline's flight attendants calling for permission to wear masks on all flights globally as cases have also been confirmed in the United States, Thailand, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. REUTERS

Man cleared of virus in Australia

SYDNEY • Tests have found that a man suspected of contracting a Sars-like disease while visiting China does not have the new coronavirus, Australian health officials said yesterday.

The man was temporarily held in isolation at his Brisbane home after returning from the central Chinese city of Wuhan suffering a respiratory illness. A Queensland Health spokesman said laboratory tests showed the man had not been infected with the new virus. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen speaking in Taipei yesterday about the virus. With her was Vice-President Chen Chien-jen. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Share correct info, Tsai urges China

TAIPEI • Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen called on China yesterday to share correct information about a new coronavirus and for the World Health Organisation (WHO) not to exclude Taiwan from collaboration on the outbreak for political reasons.

Taiwan is not a member of the WHO due to the objection of China, which considers the island a Chinese province with no right to participate in international organisations unless it accepts it is part of China.

The deputy head of China's National Health Commission, Mr Li Bin, told reporters in Beijing earlier that experts from Taiwan had been invited to visit Wuhan, and the island was being provided with information. REUTERS

N. Korea blocks foreign tourists

SEOUL • North Korea has temporarily closed its borders to foreign tourists, two major operators of tours to the isolated country said, in an apparent effort to seal itself off from the new virus.

The Beijing-based Koryo Tours said yesterday that it received word from its partners in North Korea that the country's borders were closed. Young Pioneer Tours, another group that organises trips to North Korea, had earlier said on Twitter that the temporary closures took effect yesterday. BLOOMBERG

Shop slammed over ban on Chinese

HAKONE • A Japanese confectionery shop in the popular hot spring town of Hakone has incurred the wrath of the Chinese for putting up a sign containing offensive content to ban Chinese tourists amid a global virus outbreak originating from China.

The owner of the shop in an onsen resort in the popular Yumoto district in Kanagawa prefecture told reporters he had put up the sign last Friday, one day after Japan announced its first case of infection of the novel coronavirus, called 2019-nCoV, the Asahi Shimbun news site reported.

On the Chinese Twitter-like platform Weibo, netizens are calling for a boycott of the store.

Travel agencies taking precautions for China tours

Amrita Kaur

Travel agents are bracing themselves for trip cancellations to China because of the escalating outbreak of pneumonia and taking precautionary measures with groups that are continuing with their plans.

Dynasty Travel, for instance, is providing face masks to its travellers and advising them not to visit seafood and wet markets with live animals. It is also making sure that there is no raw or uncooked meat in meal plans for its tour groups in China.

Ms Alicia Seah, director of public relations and communications at Dynasty Travel, said it currently does not have any tour groups in China but two are departing in March for a tour to Changsha, Zhangjiajie, Shanghai and Jiangnan.

She said the agency was watching the situation closely and would

work with airlines and hotels to provide alternatives, such as a change of destination, or arrange postponements, if it worsens.

With the increasing number of people falling ill in Wuhan, Beijing, Guangdong and Shanghai, Ms Seah said tour bookings to China, which make up about 20 per cent of Dynasty's overall sales, have taken a hit.

"Those who have not booked their trips to China are adopting a 'wait and see' attitude until the situation is more controlled," she said.

Hong Thai Travel had a customer asking to cancel a trip to Kunming over the upcoming Chinese New Year weekend and also received calls from worried customers planning to travel next month.

The travel agency's senior marketing manager, Ms Stella Chow, said: "As of now, the Ministry of Health has issued an advisory to defer non-essential travel to Wuhan."

"If a customer wishes to cancel a

trip to another part of China, there may be a fee charged."

Hong Thai has 13 tour groups leaving for Harbin, Kunming, Hainan and Shanxi during the Chinese New Year period, said Ms Chow.

"We have instructed all China land operators to clean and disinfect the coach buses daily.

"Our tour guides will constantly remind travellers to maintain good personal hygiene, such as washing hands before eating, wearing face masks at crowded places, and to let us know immediately if they feel

STAYING CAUTIOUS

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MSALICIA SEAH, director of public relations and communications at Dynasty Travel, noting that tour bookings to China have taken a hit since the outbreak.

unwell," she said.

Chan Brothers Travel has tour groups to Wuhan scheduled to depart in March.

If the situation persists, it will provide its travellers to China with hand sanitisers and face masks.

Travellers are also encouraged to purchase travel insurance and register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate contact in the event of an emergency.

Hotels in Singapore are also staying vigilant. Royal Plaza on Scotts is on the lookout for guests or staff who seem unwell, and will advise them to visit a doctor.

At Millennium Hotels and Resorts, all staff and guests are required to fill in declaration forms of their travel history and recent illnesses. Front desks are also equipped with infrared thermometers for use if necessary.

The health authorities will be alerted immediately if a guest falls ill. Employees who show up for work unwell will be asked to seek medical attention.

Special attention has also been placed on sanitising public contact points, such as elevator buttons, reception counters and conference and meeting rooms.

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