

Hong Kong hospitals hit 90% capacity as COVID-19 cases surge

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Patients lie on hospital beds as they wait at a temporary holding area outside Caritas Medical Centre in Hong Kong Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022. There was visible evidence that Hong Kong hospitals were becoming overwhelmed by the latest Covid surge, with patients on stretchers and in tents being seen to by medical personnel on Wednesday outside the Caritas hospital. Credit: AP Photo Vincent Yu

Hong Kong's hospitals reached 90% capacity on Thursday and quarantine facilities were at their limit, authorities said, as the city struggles to snuff out a record number of new COVID-19 cases by [adhering to China's "zero tolerance" strategy](#).

To ease the strain on the city's healthcare system, officials said they will take a different approach to hospitalization and isolation policies and allow some patients to be discharged sooner. The move comes amid reports of patients being treated on beds outside a hospital in the city's working-class neighborhood of Sham Shui Po.

Hong Kong reported 6,116 new coronavirus infections on Thursday. Any person in the city who is infected with COVID-19 must be admitted to a hospital or community isolation facility.

Under the new approach, people who are infected but present mild symptoms in hospitals and government-run isolation facilities will be allowed to leave after just seven days if they test negative on the seventh day and do not live with anyone in a high-risk group, such as senior citizens, pregnant women or immunosuppressed people.

Those who do not meet these criteria must complete the full 14-day isolation period or wait until they test negative, according to health officials.

Health experts from mainland China arrived in Hong Kong to help the city raise its testing capabilities and assist with medical resources and facilities. Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam welcomed them at the land border with the city of Shenzhen.



A patient lies on a hospital bed as she waits at a temporary holding area outside Caritas Medical Centre in Hong Kong Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022. There was visible evidence that Hong Kong hospitals were becoming overwhelmed by the latest COVID surge, with patients on stretchers and in tents being seen to by medical personnel on Wednesday outside the Caritas hospital. Credit: AP Photo Vincent Yu

"Fighting the pandemic is our paramount task," Lam said. "We will devote every resource and manpower we have. We will impose any measures that we should. The aim is to make sure Hong Kong people's lives and health are protected and to uphold Hong Kong's stability."

Authorities reported 24 new deaths over the past week. The city has now confirmed a total of 16,600 infections, with 219 deaths.

"In the last few days, we have had a lot of emergency cases where we had to accommodate patients in tents," said Chuang Shuk-kwan, the head of Hong Kong's Communicable Disease Branch, during a regular COVID-19 briefing Thursday.

"For these situations, our medical staff are very unhappy. We are worried about our patients' care," she said.

The city's Hospital Authority has appealed to medical professionals for assistance, asking doctors in private hospitals to help treat patients at quarantine facilities.



People including current hospital patients showing COVID-19 symptoms wait at a temporary holding area outside Caritas Medical Centre in Hong Kong Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022. China's leader Xi Jinping took a personal interest in

Hong Kong's outbreak, saying it was the local government's "overriding task" to control the situation, a Hong Kong newspaper said on Wednesday. Credit: AP Photo Vincent Yu

The public hospitals are in a "crisis situation," said Sara Ho of Hong Kong's Hospital Authority.

"If a large number of patients are waiting outdoors and if this continues, then no matter how hard our medical professionals work around the clock, there's no way to solve this problem relying on our own efforts," she said.

Officials have also appealed to the public, asking people to refrain from going out or taking part in private gatherings, saying that every effort helps as the city seeks to alleviate the burden on hospitals.

Separately, Hong Kong is moving infected prison inmates to an isolation facility after seven prisoners tested positive for COVID-19. The Correctional Services Department said Thursday that the Sha Tsui facility on Lantau Island was designated for quarantining infected prisoners, whose numbers are expected to grow.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping earlier ordered the central government to provide Hong Kong with resources to stabilize the outbreak, including rapid antigen tests, medical expertise and supplies.



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China has tamped down major outbreaks through its strict "zero tolerance" policy that involves quarantining incoming travelers, total lockdowns, extensive contact tracing and mass testing of millions of people.

Lam has stuck to the same strategy despite the city's greater population density, higher incomes and more service-oriented economy than in mainland China. Last week, the entire upscale Discovery Bay neighborhood in Hong Kong was ordered to undergo testing after authorities found traces of the virus in its sewage.

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