

To Fellow Veterinarians,

SARS CoV-2 was detected in multiple hamsters and/or environmental swabs from a pet shop in Causeway Bay and a related pet warehouse in Tai Po that supplied this and 34 other pet shops with hamsters. This is the first report globally of natural infection of hamsters with this virus. The samples were collected because a worker at the pet shop (who had not been to the warehouse in Tai Po) tested positive for COVID-19 and was found to be infected with a Delta strain of virus that has never been detected in Hong Kong SAR.

The available evidence points to transmission of the virus between hamsters and also hamster to human transmission of the virus, although investigations are continuing. The original source of infection for these hamsters has not been determined. The hamsters originated in the Netherlands with the last two consignments arriving on 22 December 2021 and 7 January 2022. No cases of infection have been reported in hamsters from the Netherlands but hamsters are known to be highly susceptible to infection with the virus, based on experimental studies and are capable of shedding large quantities of virus. This differs from the situation we have seen in the past with dogs and cats that were infected with the virus.

Given the risk posed to humans from infected hamsters, the relatively large number of animals involved that precludes safe quarantine, and the potential for novel variant viruses to emerge in non-human hosts, the Government decided after consultation with public health and animal health experts that euthanasia of recently imported hamsters and hamsters potentially in contact was the only course of action available. This is being coupled with an in-depth investigation of the outbreak and a review of import requirements. Measures recommended include:

1. Euthanasia of all hamsters from pet shops and the affected warehouse.
2. Temporary suspension of business for all pet shops selling hamsters until cleaning and disinfection is completed, after all hamsters for sale were removed by AFCD.

For more details, please refer to the press release:

<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202201/19/P2022011900046.htm?fontSize=1>

No additional measures were recommended for hamsters purchased **before 22 December 2021. These do not present a significant risk to public health.** Owners should be advised to keep the hamsters at home.

If any of the following are presented to your clinic,

- i) hamsters which are from a household where any human COVID-19 case has occurred in the past 2 weeks AND/OR
- ii) hamsters that have shared a cage with a hamster that falls into the **post-22 December 2021** category OR

iii) hamsters with unexplained weight loss or respiratory disease, you should wear personal protective equipment (PPE) including but not limited to masks, gloves and ideally face shields when examining the animals.

For other hamsters and pets presented to your clinic for health checks, normal hygiene and disinfection measures should be observed when handling them.

The measures above have been taken based on current public health policies for COVID-19 after carefully weighing human health and animal welfare concerns. We understand that some of your clients will be upset or confused by these measures. We hope that the above information provides some clarification. Should you have any enquiries, please do not hesitate to contact us by email (email address: mailbox@afcd.gov.hk). You can also refer to our website (www.pets.gov.hk) for further updates. Thank you very much for your kind attention in this matter.

Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
January 2022