

# Beijing tests food and parcel couriers as coronavirus checks widen

## City has done almost 2.3 mln nucleic acid tests so far

BEIJING: Officials in Beijing are carrying out tests to detect traces of coronavirus on all food and parcel delivery workers in an effort to rein in a new outbreak, state-backed media reported yesterday.

Officials in the Chinese capital have been expanding nucleic acid testing across the city of 20 million since a cluster of infections linked to a food wholesale market erupted just over a week ago.

The outbreak, the first in Beijing in months, has now surpassed previous peak numbers in the city in early February.

A nucleic acid test involves a swab sample taken from the back of a person's throat or respiratory tract, and the sample is then tested for the presence of the coronavirus' genome.

Testing was initially focused on residential areas near the sprawling Xinfadi market and on people who worked or shopped there.

Officials are now targeting the tens of thousands of delivery personnel who regularly traverse the city, where fleets of motorised pedicabs and scooters ridden by couriers delivering parcels and food are a common sight.

Workers at SF Express, China's second biggest courier firm, arrived in batches at testing points in Beijing on Friday evening, Beijing News reported.

Food delivery firm Meituan Dianping confirmed that all of its riders in the city would be tested and those who had carried out deliveries in high-risk areas would be temporarily taken off duty, undergo nucleic acid tests and be quarantined at home for 14 days.

Customers will be able to view details on



BEIJING: A man wearing a face mask sits in a subway train on Saturday. — AFP

disinfection of the delivery package and their courier's body temperature online, Meituan said on its Wechat account.

Beijing News said that all couriers in the city would be tested by next week.

Officials have highlighted the risk of contamination through packaging in Beijing, which reported 22 new cases on Friday. The capital has now recorded more than 200 locally transmitted infections since June 11.

Officials have been testing people working in catering, including restaurant staff, as well as imported food after the virus was found on chopping boards at Xinfadi used to handle salmon.

A total of 2.3 million nucleic acid tests had been carried out in Beijing as of 0600 local

time yesterday (2200 GMT on Friday), Zhang Qiang, an official from Beijing's municipal committee, said at a news conference.

Residents of 40 communities under lockdown in the capital are required to self-isolate at home to avoid possible further transmission of the virus, Zhang said.

Those that do not comply will be centrally quarantined for 14 days, after which they should take another nucleic acid test and are free to leave if the result is negative, he added.

In Dongcheng district in the eastern part of Beijing, two Reuters journalists received notice on Friday that everyone living in their communities would be tested, even though they were in low-risk areas. — Reuters

## Novartis halts malaria drug trial against COVID-19

ZURICH: Swiss drugmaker Novartis is halting its trial of malaria drug hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) against COVID-19 after struggling to find participants, it said on Friday, as data emerged from other studies raising doubts about its efficacy. Novartis' trial began in April and sought to test the drug in 440 hospitalized patients. But the project only managed to recruit a handful.

Novartis' move follows this week's U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) decision to revoke emergency use authorization for hydroxychloroquine against COVID-19 on grounds it and a related drug, chloroquine, are unlikely to help patients.

Hydroxychloroquine, also used to treat inflammatory disorders including rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, has been caught in a political debate as U.S. President Donald Trump promoted it, even though there was no scientific evidence that it helps against the new coronavirus. Several studies of the decades-old malaria drug including in Britain were recently halted after scientists concluded it was "useless" against COVID-19. This week the World Health Organization halted the hydroxychloroquine arm of one of its trials. "The recruitment challenge facing our

hydroxychloroquine trial has made it unlikely that the clinical team will be able to collect meaningful data in a reasonable time frame to determine the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine in treating patients with COVID-19," Novartis said. Trump, who said he used HCQ as a COVID-19 prophylactic, criticized the FDA decision to revoke its emergency authorization.

The Basel-based company said its study, so far, raised no safety issues and drew no conclusions about HCQ's efficacy. Novartis' trial coincided with increasing use of Gilead Science's drug remdesivir, which has been shown in trials to speed recovery from COVID-19.

The FDA has also warned against mixing remdesivir with HCQ.

French drugmaker Sanofi, which previously suspended recruitment of patients for two HCQ trials, told Reuters it would make a decision in "coming days" over whether it would resume its own studies. Novartis had donated up to 130 million doses of hydroxychloroquine, including millions in the United States, and Chief Executive Vas Narasimhan two months ago pegged it as the company's biggest hope against the new coronavirus. — Reuters

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