

## Demand for face masks, hand sanitisers soars



A notice posted on the doors of a shop in Kuala Lumpur, informing customers that it's out of stock of facemasks and hand sanitisers. -NSTP/Intan Nur Elliana ZaKARIA

By Hana Naz Harun, Teh Athira Yusof, Farah Solhi - January 31, 2020 @ 10:25am

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The rising fear among the public over the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) has caused a high demand for surgical face masks and hand sanitisers over the last few days.

News of the virus being confirmed in countries outside its epicentre in Wuhan, China, had caused global citizens to be on "panic mode".

Not excluded were Malaysians, who had stocked up on face masks and hand sanitisers.

Malaysian authorities announced an eighth victim of the 2019-nCoV yesterday, a 49-year-old Chinese tourist who was admitted to the isolation ward in Permai Hospital in Johor Baru.

A source from a local pharmacy franchise said demand for surgical face masks and hand sanitisers "went through the roof" since the first confirmed case of 2019-nCoV in Malaysia last Saturday.



"These two items are sold out everywhere, especially in the Klang Valley and I believe it is due to unwarranted panic stirred on social media.

"Besides these items, digital thermometers are also sold out," the source said.

The spread of the 2019-nCoV had also disrupted plans in the business community.

"Nobody predicted that this outbreak would be so explosive. It has thrown us off course from our initial business plans and forecast."

He said almost all pharmacies sourced their surgical face masks and hand sanitisers from local manufacturers.

"Previously, we purchased our stocks from a manufacturer in China. But due to the outbreak, which happened during the Lunar New Year, manufacturers have put on hold their operations, especially in cities locked down in China.

"So now, we have turned to local manufacturers for these items. But the cost is slightly higher because local manufacturers have to deal with a low volume of production against higher costs of manufacturing."

The source said due to the Lunar New Year holidays, it was possible that manufacturers were faced with shortage of staff issues.

"I hope operations will resume normally in two weeks' time, and the panic will ease."

Meanwhile, a company dealing with safety appliances said the shortage of face masks was beyond its control.



Suhail Rana, arranges the remaining boxes of facemasks at his shop in Bangsar. -NSTP/Intan Nur Elliana Zakaria



Safety Wear Group representative, Douglas Yeap, said: "There's an excessive increase in demand for surgical face masks. But the only thing we can do is to wait for stocks to come in."

People whom the NST spoke to said they were "stressed" in dealing with the shortage of face masks and hand sanitisers.

A public transport user, who only wanted to be known as Suraya, 28, said she tried to buy the items over the past four days, but to no avail.

"I take public transport to work every day. Now that Malaysia has eight confirmed cases, I cannot help but feel a bit paranoid.

"But life must go on. If using face masks and sanitisers helps minimise the risk of infection, I'll readily comply.

"But I am frustrated upon seeing how these items were sold out at all three stores I went to," she said.

Graphic designer Ainul Hayati Hasim, 24, said the shortage of face masks and hand sanitisers could give an impression that the situation was out of control.

"But the good thing is that maybe it will raise awareness among people to take better care of their hygiene."

The death toll from 2019-nCoV had reached 170 people and with 7,711 confirmed cases up until yesterday.

The virus had now spread to more than a dozen countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Singapore and Malaysia.

Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail said face mask manufacturers had been told to increase production to meet public demand.

"People are taking steps to prevent infection from the outbreak by using hand sanitisers and face masks.

"Based on the report that we received from the manufacturers, current face mask supply is insufficient to meet demand. The ministry will request for more.

"Due to the Chinese New Year break, manufacturers' operations were slower than usual," he said at the launch of the Tesco "Buy Malaysian Product" campaign at Tesco Extra Kajang yesterday.

Saifuddin said the ministry's enforcement officers had reported "panic purchases", which led to the dwindling supply.

"It is found that there has been an increase of 'panic purchases' by the public, especially in Johor, of face masks and hand sanitisers.

"The supply (of both products) is enough to prevent any more panic among the people and I hope that the public will remain calm."