

Struggle to meet demand for masks

Suppliers say most of them import from China which faces a shortage too

By LOH FOON FONG
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KUALA LUMPUR: Pharmacists claimed that they were not able to stock up on face masks over the past two weeks despite assurances from the government that there will be adequate supply for local needs.

U Pharm community pharmacy operations manager Lai Yet Kuan said that while bigger pharmacy chains get very limited supply, she has not been able to get them from suppliers over the past two weeks. Customers seeking face masks had to be turned away daily, she added.

"Suppliers also cannot get them from our local manufacturers," she told *The Star*.

On Feb 7, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail said he had asked local manufacturers to increase face mask production by another 400,000 pieces daily to ensure sufficient supply in the wake of Covid-19.

Face masks are controlled items and the price has been set at 80 sen per unit for the three-ply masks and RM6 per unit for the N95, he said.

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In short supply: Storekeeper Nur Jannah Hidayah putting up a sign to say that face masks are out of stock at a pharmacy in Kuala Lumpur.

ilar assurances but pharmacies said they have not been able to get stock.

"Nothing in the market," said Lai. She said that since the outbreak, her pharmacy here sold an average of 100 boxes of 50 pieces of masks each daily, double the usual demand. More are sold if some

bought them for friends overseas.

She said parents have complained to her that their children have to wear masks in daycare centres and kindergartens or they will be turned away.

Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society president Amrahi Buang

said supply in community pharmacies, especially in Sabah, Sarawak and sub-rural and rural areas had dried-up due to panic buying.

Also, local manufacturers preferred exporting them overseas to China, Hong Kong and Singapore as they fetch better prices, he added.

"The government should ask local manufacturers to stockpile masks for local needs if the disease gets worse," he said.

Suppliers said most suppliers here import face masks from China and they could not get supplies now due to shortage in China itself.

Safetyware Sdn Bhd managing director Wong Kee Wei said they could not get supplies from all four local face mask manufacturers.

"One said if we order them now, they can supply only in August," he said, adding that local manufacturers also faced challenges getting raw materials from China.

Asked about supplies from other countries, Wong said China supplied two-thirds of global demand and this poses a challenge to fill.

Another medical supplies importer who declined to be named said he contacted three local manufacturers but was told that they supply

face masks to the government and existing clients but not to others.

Meanwhile, a 3M Malaysia Sdn Bhd spokesman said global demand for respirators (face masks) now exceeds supply and the company was ramping up production at its manufacturing facilities in the US, Asia and Europe.

"In Malaysia, China and around the world, 3M is working with customers, distributors, government and medical officers to help get supplies where they are most needed," she said.

Amrahi advised Malaysians against panic buying and said that they do not need to wear face masks unless necessary.

"The limited stock should be kept for healthcare workers who attend to patients and vulnerable groups.

"If we don't go into crowded areas, we don't need it."

He said Malaysia's situation is not the same as that of China, Hong Kong and Singapore's.

"Although Malaysians travelled during recent holidays and Chinese New Year, like those in China, we were not exposed to the virus then," he said, adding that risk of local transmission is much lower.

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