

Daily rapid testing for COVID-19 contacts launches this week

- Those who test positive or develop symptoms will need to self-isolate
- Unvaccinated adults must continue to self-isolate for 10 days if they are a contact of someone with COVID-19
- It follows a significant rise in Omicron cases in the UK with the new variant expected to become the dominant strain by mid-December

From Tuesday 14 December, people who are fully vaccinated and identified as a contact of someone with COVID-19 – whether Omicron or not – should take an NHS rapid lateral flow test every day for 7 days to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

The practical move comes as Omicron infections are rising significantly in the UK and it is expected to become the dominant strain in the UK by mid-December. It aims to reduce pressures on people's everyday lives by replacing the requirement for Omicron contacts to isolate for 10 days, while protecting the public by identifying asymptomatic cases and stopping the chains of transmission. Testing daily will also help us understand how and where the virus is spreading.

Close contacts of people who test positive are at higher risk of getting COVID-19 and, with 1 in 3 people asymptomatic, daily testing will help ensure people are not unknowingly passing the virus on to others.

As now, anyone whose rapid test comes back positive or who develops COVID-19 symptoms should self-isolate and take a confirmatory PCR test to verify the result. If the PCR result comes back positive, contacts must self-isolate for 10 days from the day they took the positive rapid test or developed symptoms. They do not need to continue taking rapid tests during that 10 day isolation period. If the PCR result comes back negative, contacts can leave self-isolation but should continue to take rapid tests for the remainder of the 7 days.

Anyone identified as a contact with a negative rapid lateral flow result is strongly advised to limit close contact with other people outside their household, especially in crowded or enclosed spaces and with anyone who is more vulnerable. They should also follow government guidance on wearing a face covering and working from home where possible.

Unvaccinated adults are not eligible for this new daily testing policy, they must self-isolate for 10 days if they are a contact of someone who tests positive for COVID-19 – Omicron or not – unless eligible for an existing workplace daily contact testing.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

The Omicron variant is quickly gaining ground in the UK and is

expected to become the dominant strain by mid-December.

We are taking this proportionate and more practical measure to limit the impact on people's day to day lives while helping to reduce the spread of Omicron.

Vaccines remain our best defence and I urge anyone yet to get a first and second jab to come forward and those eligible for a booster to get boosted as soon as possible.

Dr Jenny Harries, UKHSA CEO said:

If you are identified as a contact of someone with COVID-19, taking a rapid daily test – and only needing to isolate if it is positive – will help reduce the spread of the virus and minimise its impact on our everyday lives over the coming weeks and months. Rapid tests are freely available in pharmacies and online.

Our latest analysis shows that boosters provide the best protection against the Omicron variant, please go forward when you are called. If you haven't had any vaccine, a first and second dose still gives you protection against becoming seriously unwell. Don't worry about stepping forwards now – you will be warmly welcomed by our vaccination staff and I would strongly advise you to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

People will be contacted by NHS Test and Trace by phone, email or text or they will receive a notification from the NHS COVID-19 app to tell them they are a contact of someone who tested positive and what action they need to take.

They will be advised to get a box of 7 lateral flow tests free of charge from NHS Test and Trace either through pharmacies, schools or home delivery by ordering online. People are encouraged to use the tests they already have at home before ordering more. People should take these tests from the day they are notified as being a contact and report their results to NHS Test and Trace on GOV.UK or by calling 119.

Testing with isolation remains a vital tool in controlling the spread of Omicron given how quickly it passes from person to person. Extensive clinical evaluation shows lateral flow tests are accurate and sensitive enough to be used in the community and detect 80 to 90% people that are highly infectious very quickly, so more people who are at a high likelihood of spreading the virus isolate and prevent the variant from spreading to others.

The Prime Minister confirmed on Wednesday 8 December that England will move to Plan B following the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the UK. This means people are advised to work from home where possible and face coverings are compulsory in most indoor venues, such as cinemas, theatres and places of worship.

The UK Health Security Agency published preliminary data on Friday showing COVID-19 booster vaccines provide around 70 to 75% protection against symptomatic infection from the Omicron variant. The data showed that 2 doses of AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines alone provided much lower levels of protection against symptomatic infection compared to the protection that they provide against Delta, stressing the importance of people getting their booster jabs.

The government and NHS have expanded the booster programme to all adults and all over-18s in England will be offered a top-up dose by the end of January. People aged 30 and over will be invited to book from Monday 13 December and the NHS will invite younger people in due course in order of age.

To speed up the booster programme, around 450 military personnel have been drafted in to support deployment, with 1,500 community pharmacy sites, additional hospital hubs and pop-up sites opening in convenient locations across the country. Extra financial support to GPs, community pharmacies and primary care staff will help boost capacity and encourage more visits to those who are housebound.

Daily rapid testing applies to all contacts who are:

- fully vaccinated adults – people who have had 2 jabs
- all children aged 5 to 18 years and 6 months, regardless of their vaccination status
- people who can prove they are unable to be vaccinated for clinical reasons
- people taking part, or have taken part, in an approved clinical trial for a COVID-19 vaccine

Under 5s are exempt from self-isolation and do not need to take part in daily rapid lateral flow testing.

On Tuesday 14 December the government will amend guidance on requiring all contacts of suspected or confirmed Omicron cases to self-isolate. This system will be in guidance rather than law initially, but this will be kept under review.