

Government launches UK-wide antibody surveillance programme

- UK Health Security Agency to launch UK-wide antibody surveillance programme for the general public for the first time
- Home antibody tests available for up to 8,000 people a day across the UK who opt in to the service through NHS Test and Trace
- Data will improve understanding of the protection provided by antibodies generated following COVID-19 infection and vaccination

Thousands of adults a day will be given free access to antibody tests through a new national surveillance programme launched by the UK Health Security Agency next week, to help improve our understanding of immunity against COVID-19 from vaccination and infection.

For the first time, the programme will offer antibody testing to adults in the UK who test positive. From Tuesday, anyone aged over 18 will be able to opt in to take part when booking a PCR test through NHS Test and Trace. Up to 8,000 people who opt in and then receive a positive PCR result will be sent two finger prick antibody tests to complete at home and send back to a lab for analysis.

The UK Health Security Agency will work alongside NHS Test and Trace testing services in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to monitor levels of antibodies in positive cases across the UK. The data collected will help estimate the proportion of those who got COVID-19 despite developing antibodies as a result of having a vaccine or previously catching coronavirus.

The initiative could also provide insight into any groups of people who do not develop an immune response. The UK Health Security Agency will use the data to inform our ongoing approach to COVID-19 and provide further insight into the effectiveness of the vaccines against different variants.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Sajid Javid said:

Our new national antibody testing will be quick and easy to take part in, and by doing so you'll be helping strengthen our understanding of COVID-19 as we cautiously return to a more normal life.

I'm proud to see all parts of the UK uniting around this new initiative and working together to arm ourselves with even more valuable insights into how COVID-19 vaccines are protecting people

up and down the UK.

Our phenomenal vaccination programme continues to build a massive wall of defence across the country – already preventing around 24 million infections and more than 100,000 deaths in England alone. I urge everyone across the UK to get both vaccinations as soon as possible.

All adults interested in the study are encouraged to opt in. Anyone taking part must take their first antibody test as soon as possible after receiving a positive PCR result, before the body has had time to generate a detectable antibody response to the current infection. The first test will determine the level of antibodies a person had before their current infection.

The second test should be taken 28 days after testing positive for COVID-19 and will measure antibodies generated in response to the infection. By comparing the two antibody test results, the UK Health Security Agency will be able to see how well vaccinated individuals boost their immunity when they are infected and how this might vary with different variants.

Testing positive for antibodies does not mean someone is immune from COVID-19 and people must continue to follow the rules, get tested if they have symptoms and self-isolate if positive or are a contact of a positive case and have not received both vaccine doses, to prevent the virus from spreading.

Chief Executive of the UK National Health Security Agency Dr Jenny Harries said:

We are rolling out antibody testing across the UK to gain vital data into the impact of our vaccination programme and on immune responses to different variants of COVID-19.

This innovative programme is only possible thanks to the thousands of people who continue to help with studies on vaccine and treatment effectiveness each week.

The best way to protect yourself and those around you is by getting vaccinated. I encourage anyone who has not yet come forward to book their first and second jabs.

Dr Susan Hopkins, Public Health England's COVID-19 Strategic Response Director said:

Our testing armoury is stronger than ever now we are rolling out antibody testing to thousands of people in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland alongside the vast testing capacity we have built including our NHS Test and Trace system.

Antibody testing surveillance shows how health teams across the UK

are dedicated to working together to find innovative ways to understand the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines and target future treatments for COVID-19.

The NHS has guidance on what you can do to look after yourself and treat any symptoms you may have following a positive PCR result. It remains vital people continue to get a PCR swab test if they have symptoms and self-isolate when asked by NHS Test and Trace. Individuals should not change their behaviour based on an antibody result.

Antibodies are part of the body's immune response to help fight off infection and are generated either after being infected or following vaccination. Antibody testing looks for evidence of this immune response, whereas PCR and antigen testing tells someone if they have the virus at the time of test.

Antibody testing will contribute to our understanding of the protection provided by vaccines. 87% of people aged 16 and over have now received their first COVID-19 vaccine dose and 76% have had their second dose.

The government is working closely with the NHS to make it as easy as possible to get a vaccine, including through 'grab a jab' pop-up vaccine sites across the country, such as London-based nightclub Heaven, as well as football stadiums and festivals up and down the country.

Advice and information on the benefits of vaccination have been shared at every opportunity, including through a range of partnerships with industries catering for predominantly younger audiences.

This work has included partnerships with high-profile entertainment and sports personalities on short films encouraging people to get the jab, such as film stars Jim Broadbent and Thandiwe Newton, and football figures Harry Redknapp and Chris Kamara.

The government has also partnered with dating apps, social media platforms and large companies, such as Uber and Deliveroo, on adverts and incentives to get the vaccine.

Secretary of State for Wales Simon Hart said:

The UK government has launched a new antibody testing to those who opt in when booking a PCR test through Test Trace Protect in Wales, which will enable us to deepen our understanding of COVID-19.

I'm proud that Wales, along with the other three UK nations, are collaborating on such an important programme and I urge everyone to opt in and take advantage of the testing available.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Brandon Lewis said:

I would encourage as many people as possible in Northern Ireland to opt in to take part in the new national antibody testing programme when booking a PCR test.

Improving our understanding of COVID-19 is essential in supporting the UK's fightback against the pandemic.

In addition, with over 85% of those eligible in Northern Ireland having had their first vaccination and almost 80% fully vaccinated against COVID-19, I would urge the public to continue this great effort to ensure that they and their families are protected.

UK Government Minister for Scotland Iain Stewart said:

I'd urge everyone in Scotland to opt in for this new antibody test when booking a PCR test through Test and Protect. It's a quick and easy process and you'll be making a massive contribution to our understanding of COVID-19.

Ensuring as many people as possible are tested and vaccinated is our biggest line of defence as we continue our journey out of this pandemic.

Notes to editors

- This is the first time antibody tests have been made available to the general public. Until now, antibody testing has only been available to specific cohorts for clinical or research purposes, and to some people across the devolved administrations working in professions such as in education, social care or the NHS.
- The initiative is for surveillance only and the numbers will be limited to 8,000 per day.
- The NHS has guidance on what you can do to look after yourself and treat any symptoms you may have following a positive PCR result. It remains vital people continue to get a PCR swab test if they have symptoms and self-isolate when asked by NHS Test and Trace.
- Antibodies take time to develop. Most people make antibodies within 28 days of being infected or vaccinated, but it can take longer. This survey uses two different antibody tests, one that can see past infection only and one that can see response to the vaccine. As an example, if an individual has had a COVID-19 vaccine but no prior infection, the first antibody test taken as part of this surveillance would likely display a negative antibody result in response to their new or past infection, and a positive result for the antibodies generated by

their vaccine. Following the second antibody test take 28 days after the first, there would likely be a higher positive antibody result to the vaccine and a positive infection antibody result.