

Government sets out next steps for living with COVID

- Free COVID-19 tests will continue to be available to help protect specific groups including eligible patients and NHS and care staff once the universal testing offer ends on 1 April and next steps for adult social care set out
- Plans in place to enable rapid testing response should a new health threat emerge, such as a new variant of concern emerge
- Vaccines and treatments mean we can transition to managing COVID-19 like other respiratory illnesses, with updated guidance published on 1 April

People at risk of serious illness from COVID-19, and eligible for treatments, will continue to get free tests to use if they develop symptoms, along with NHS and adult social care staff and those in other high-risk settings, Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid announced today (Tuesday 29 March).

Free testing for the general public ends on 1 April as part of the Living with Covid plan which last month set out the government's strategy to live with and manage the virus.

Although COVID-19 infections and hospitalisations have risen in recent weeks, over 55% of those in hospital that have tested positive are not there with COVID-19 as their primary diagnosis.

Free universal testing has come at a significant cost to the taxpayer, with the testing, tracing and isolation budget costing over £15.7 billion in 2021-22. This was necessary due to the severe risk posed by COVID-19 when the population did not have a high level of protection.

Thanks to the success of the vaccination programme and access to antivirals, alongside natural immunity and increased scientific and public understanding about how to manage risk, the population now has much stronger protection against COVID-19 than at any other point in the pandemic.

This is enabling the country to begin to manage the virus like other respiratory infections.

From 1 April, updated guidance will advise people with symptoms of a respiratory infection, including COVID-19, and a high temperature or who feel unwell, to try stay at home and avoid contact with other people, until they feel well enough to resume normal activities and they no longer have a high temperature. Until 1 April individuals should continue to follow the current guidance.

From 1 April, anyone with a positive COVID-19 test result will be advised to try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for five days, which is when they are most infectious.

Advice will be provided for individuals who need to leave their home when

they have symptoms or have tested positive, including avoiding close contact with people with a weakened immune system, wearing a face-covering and avoiding crowded places.

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

Thanks to our plan to tackle Covid we are leading the way in learning to live with the virus. We have made enormous progress but will keep the ability to respond to future threats including potential variants.

Vaccines remain our best defence and we are now offering spring boosters to the elderly, care home residents and the most vulnerable – please come forward to protect yourself, your family, and your community.

Under the plans set out today free symptomatic testing will be provided for:

- Patients in hospital, where a PCR test is required for their care and to provide access to treatments and to support ongoing clinical surveillance for new variants;
- People who are eligible for community COVID-19 treatments because they are at higher risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19. People in this group will be contacted directly and sent lateral flow tests to keep at home for use if they have symptoms as well as being told how to reorder tests; and
- People living or working in some high-risk settings. For example, staff in adult social care services such as homecare organisations and care homes, and residents in care homes and extra care and supported living services, NHS workers and those working and living in hospices, and prisons and places of detention (including immigration removal centres), where infection needs to be identified quickly to minimise outbreaks. People will also be tested before being discharged from hospital into care homes, hospices, homelessness settings and domestic abuse refuges.

Asymptomatic lateral flow testing will continue from April in some high-risk settings where infection can spread rapidly while prevalence is high. This includes patient-facing staff in the NHS and NHS-commissioned Independent Healthcare Providers, staff in hospices and adult social care services, such as homecare organisations and care homes, a small number of care home visitors who provide personal care, staff in some prisons and places of detention and in high risk domestic abuse refuges and homelessness settings. In addition, testing will be provided for residential SEND, care home staff and residents during an outbreak and for care home residents upon admission. This also includes some staff in prisons and immigration removal centres.

Children and young people who are unwell and have a high temperature should stay at home and avoid contact with other people, where they can. They can go back to school, college or childcare when they no longer have a high temperature, and they are well enough to attend.

The internationally recognised Community Infection Survey delivered through the Office for National Statistics will continue to provide a detailed national surveillance capability in the coming year so the government can respond appropriately to emerging developments such as a new variant of concern or changing levels of population infection. Infections in health and care settings will also be monitored through bespoke studies including the Vivaldi study in residential care homes, the SIREN study in the NHS, and RCGP surveillance in primary care.

The government has retained the ability to enable a rapid testing response should it be needed, such as the emergence of a new variant of concern.

This includes a stockpile of lateral flow tests and the ability to ramp up testing laboratories and delivery channels.

The government's Therapeutics Taskforce and Antiviral Taskforce will also be merged into a single unit which will continue to focus on securing access to the most promising treatments for COVID-19.

Dame Jenny Harries, Chief Executive of the UK Health Security Agency, said:

As we learn to live with Covid, we are focusing our testing provision on those at higher risk of serious outcomes from the virus, while encouraging people to keep following simple steps to help keep themselves and others safe.

The pandemic is not over and how the virus will develop over time remains uncertain. Covid still poses a real risk to many of us, particularly with case rates and hospitalisations on the rise. That is why it is sensible to wear a mask in enclosed spaces, keep indoor spaces ventilated and stay away from others if you have any symptoms of a respiratory illness, including Covid.

Vaccination remains the best way to protect us all from severe disease and hospitalisation due to Covid infection. If you have not yet come forward for your primary or booster I would urge you to do so straight away – the NHS vaccine programme is there to help you and the sooner you are vaccinated the sooner you and your family and friends will be protected.

Most visitors to adult social care settings, and visitors to the NHS, prisons or places of detention will no longer be required to take a test. More guidance on what people should do when visiting adult social care settings will be published by 1 April.

A number of changes and new guidance is also being confirmed today for adult social care including:

- From 1 April, those working in adult social care services will also continue to receive free personal protective equipment (PPE). Priority vaccinations and boosters for residents and staff will also continue

- Updated hospital discharge guidance will be published setting out how all involved in health and social care will work together to ensure smooth discharges from hospital and people receive the right care at the right time in the right place
- Designated settings will be removed. These were initially set up to provide a period of isolation to COVID-19 positive patients before they move into care homes and before routine point of care testing for COVID-19 was available. Restrictions on staff movement will also be removed
- Streamlined guidance on infection and prevention control measures will be published to set out long-standing principles on good practice, and support consistency across the adult social care sector. This will include details on future measures for COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses to ensure providers have the latest information on best practice which will include information on admissions, visiting and PPE
- Updated guidance for adult social care providers and staff to set out the current testing regime across adult social care
- Outbreak management periods in care homes, which can include visiting restrictions, have been reduced from 14 to 10 days
- People aged 75 and over, residents in care homes for elderly adults and those who are immunosuppressed are now eligible to receive a Spring booster jab to top up their immunity to COVID-19. Around five million people will be eligible for a Spring booster around six months after their previous dose, and the NHS has contacted over 600,000 people inviting them to book an appointment. Anyone who has not yet had a COVID-19 jab continues to be encouraged to take up the 'evergreen' offer.

The cost of these changes will be met within existing funding arrangements. As part of this, free parking for NHS staff introduced during the pandemic will also come to an end on 31 March. We are delivering on our the manifesto commitment to provide free hospital car parking to thousands more NHS patients and visitors – with over 94% of NHS trusts implementing free car parking for those who need it most, including NHS staff working night shifts.

Through the Health and Social Care Levy, funding will rise by a record £36 billion over the next three years. This is on top of the previous historic long-term settlement for the NHS, which will see NHS funding increase by £33.9 billion by 2023-24, which has been enshrined in law.

The success of the government's Living with Covid plan, will enable the country to continue to move out of the pandemic while also protecting those at higher risk of serious outcomes from the virus through our testing regime.

- Further information on [NHS car parking regulations](#)
- In July 2020 the government temporarily introduced free hospital car parking for all NHS staff for the duration of the pandemic, investing around £130 million over the past two years to bring about the changes
- Guidance will be updated on 1 April. New guidance will outline the steps people can take to reduce the chances of catching COVID-19 and passing it on to others. These actions will also help to reduce the spread of other respiratory infections, such as flu

- Principles that employers can follow will also be published on 1 April to help them decide how to reduce risks in their workplace
- Alongside hospital patients, patients in primary care who need a test for differential clinical diagnosis will also receive a free test
- As part of the Living with Covid strategy, from 1 April it will no longer be advised for domestic venues and events to use the NHS COVID pass
- The NHS COVID-19 app for contact tracing will remain active and if needed could be used as tool for dealing with any future threats from COVID-19
- UKHSA has worked with devolved governments to take forward the testing programme through the early phases of the pandemic and is committed to continuing joint working with each nation in 2022-23
- Further information on those whose [immune system means they are at a higher risk](#)
- Further information on the [Living with Covid strategy](#)
- Further information on the Therapeutics and Antivirals Taskforce will be outlined in due course