

Government to offer antibody tests to health and social care staff and patients in England

- All NHS and care staff in England will be offered a test, with patients and care residents eligible at their clinician's request
- Accurate and reliable lab-based antibody tests will improve understanding and data on COVID-19
- Devolved administrations will decide who is eligible for tests in their jurisdictions

Antibody tests will be available to NHS and care staff, eligible patients and care residents in England to see if they have had coronavirus as part of a new national antibody testing programme announced by Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock.

Tests will be prioritised for NHS and care staff, and clinicians will be able to request them for patients in both hospital and social care settings if they deem it appropriate.

The new antibody testing programme, which will start next week, follows the substantial expansion of the UK's swab testing capacity, which saw the creation of the country's biggest network of diagnostic labs completed in record time. Swab testing confirms whether or not someone currently has the virus that causes COVID-19.

Under the new programme announced today, highly accurate laboratory based antibody tests will be used to tell whether someone has already had the virus, to provide accurate data about the antibodies they have developed in response. The information will help clinicians and scientists to better understand the prevalence of the virus in different regions across the country.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock said:

Today we have signed contracts to supply over 10 million tests from Roche and Abbott supply in the coming months. From next week, we will begin rolling these out in a phased way. At first, to health and care staff, patients and residents.

This is an important milestone and it represents further progress in our national testing programme. Knowing you have these antibodies will help us to understand in the future if you are at lower risk of catching coronavirus, dying from coronavirus and of transmitting coronavirus.

History has shown that understanding an enemy is fundamental to defeating it. In this latest fight, our ingenuity and our brilliant

scientists and our scientific curiosity is what will keep us one step ahead of this virus. We all have something to bring though in this fight – one action every one of us can take is to follow the rules on hygiene and social distancing. Not just for you, but for your loved ones and for your community. So please, stay alert, control the virus and save lives.

Ten million tests so far have been secured in a landmark deal with industry, including Roche Diagnostics and Abbott Laboratories, and these will be rolled out over the coming months, with further agreements being negotiated with suppliers to supply millions of laboratory-based antibody tests.

A positive test result for antibodies, whichever test is used, does not currently mean that the person being tested is immune to COVID-19. There is also no firm evidence that the presence of antibodies means someone cannot be re-infected with the virus or will not pass it on to someone else. If someone tests positive, they still need to follow social distancing measures and appropriate use of PPE.

As previously announced, a Public Health England (PHE) study called SIREN is already underway to help answer these questions and establish whether antibodies indicate immunity to COVID-19. A sample of 10,000 healthcare workers are being tested to examine any potential immunity to the virus.

Professor John Newton, National Coordinator of the UK COVID-19 testing programme, said:

Our understanding of this virus will only continue to grow as new scientific evidence and studies emerge. This new national testing programme is a very important part of that work.

COVID-19 is a new disease, and our understanding of the body's immune response to the virus that causes it is limited. Progress is being made every day, but we do not yet know how long immunity lasts, nor whether having antibodies means a person cannot transmit the virus to others. It is vital that everyone continues to follow social distancing measures, playing their part to halt the spread of infection.

SIREN study lead, Dr Susan Hopkins, said:

The results of this PHE study will be an important piece of the puzzle. We know people who have had COVID-19 produce antibodies in response but what we don't know is whether this means they have immunity against future infection and how long that protection may last. Improving our understanding will be critical to future decisions about how best to control the spread of coronavirus.

Antibody tests require blood samples, which will be collected by trained staff and analysed by existing pathology labs across England. Data on the number of positive and negative cases will be reported to PHE.

Health and social care staff will be asked by their employer whether they want to have an antibody test. For NHS staff, the NHS in England has set up a network of regional CEOs to oversee this work. The NHS will use existing phlebotomy services and will set up more to ensure all staff can be tested.

For care staff, the testing programme will be rolled out in a phased way across regions in England. We will agree with local leaders the best place in the country to start the programme and we will work with them to decide how this is implemented. Social care staff will be tested using a separate phlebotomy service, which will be able to take blood at their place of work.

Patients who are already having blood taken as part of other tests will be asked whether they would like an antibody test.

Antibody testing will have a critical role to play in improving understanding about the level and duration of immunity following infection, and how the virus is spreading across the country.

The UK government is using its significant buying power to arrange supplies of tests on behalf of the devolved administrations, and each devolved nation is deciding how to use its test allocation and how testing will be prioritised and managed.

Research is underway to understand more about the prevalence of the virus among the UK population through a combination of blood and swab testing in addition to PHE's immunity study. This is one of a range of surveillance studies under Pillar 4 of the Testing Strategy, including studies by the [ONS](#), [Imperial College and IPSOS MORI](#), and [Biobank](#). This information will help the government manage the ongoing response to the pandemic.

Only lab-based antibody tests with CE marks that have been evaluated by Public Health England (PHE) and shown to provide reliable results will be used in the programme. The government has agreed contracts to supply tests with a number of suppliers and will continue to engage with other companies to establish further agreements.

The Public Health England study seeks to understand whether the presence of COVID antibodies protects people from future infection of COVID-19. Up to 10,000 healthcare workers will be studied for at least a year, with data collected recording history of infection and any new symptoms that appear during the course of the study.

Individuals will have nose and throat swabs and blood samples taken regularly to determine new acute infections and measure their antibody response. The study will provide vital information to help better understand the future impact of COVID-19 on the population.