

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 21 May 2020

Good afternoon and welcome to Downing Street for the daily coronavirus briefing.

I'm joined by Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer, and Professor John Newton, who is our adviser on test and trace.

Before I turn to the latest coronavirus data, I wanted to say something this Mental Health Awareness Week.

I know how difficult the change and uncertainty generated by this awful virus has been for so many people. So many moments of joy have been put on hold. Cherished milestones, important events and time with loved ones – things that were in the diary but can't any longer.

So I want to say this to anyone who has been finding it hard. These are tough times. It is OK to be not OK. And it is normal to feel low, anxious, or unhappy sometimes.

But it is so important that if you think you need it, please seek help. If you want to talk to someone, please, go to the NHS – it is there for you.

And if you are a health or care worker, there is bespoke series of support so we can care for you just as you care for us – just text FRONTLINE to 85258.

Mental health charities are also offering some brilliant support too. Today I am providing a further 4.2 million pounds so organisations like Samaritans and Young Minds and Mental Health UK can keep on doing what they do best.

Everyone can strengthen their mental health, just in the same way as we keep an eye on our physical health, including when we are healthy.

And PHE's Every Mind Matters campaign is something that every single person can engage with and can use to strengthen your mental health and wellbeing – in good times and in bad. So let's all come together this Mental Health Awareness Week and support each other.

Turning to the daily figures...

We have now completed over 3 million tests for coronavirus. In total, 3,090,566 tests have been carried out in the UK, including 128,340 yesterday tests carried out yesterday.

250,908 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 2,615 cases since yesterday.

9,543 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus. That is a 14% fall from the same time last week.

Sadly, of those who tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 36,042 people have now died. That's an increase of 338 fatalities since yesterday.

This is a deadly virus and it has brought pain to so many both here and across the world. But we are making real progress in our fight.

I'd like to take a moment to remind everyone about our plan to defeat coronavirus and to get Britain moving once again.

Slide one please.

As you may have seen at previous briefings, we have now put in place our COVID Alert Level System. It consists of 5 levels, based on the R value and the number of new cases.

This alert level guides the social distancing rules, which have proved to be so effective at getting the virus under control. The higher the alert level, the stricter the rules.

Throughout the lockdown, we have been at level 4. As you can see, level 4 means that coronavirus is in general circulation and that transmission is either high or exponentially rising.

But, thanks to your shared sacrifice, we've now brought R down. And now, because of our caution, we are in a position to start moving to level 3.

Next slide please.

And here is how we can move forward... We've set out 3 steps that we plan to take, carefully, to modify the social distancing rules and start to restore freedom in this country, all the while avoiding a disastrous second peak that could overwhelm the NHS.

At each step, we will closely monitor the impact on R, on the number of new infections and on all available data.

We are currently at step 1, which means:

- if you work but you can't work from home, you should speak to your employer about going back in
- you can now spend time outdoors and exercise as often as you like
- and you can meet one other person from outside your household in an outdoor, public place, but you should stay 2 metres apart

We will move to step 2 on 1 June if we are able to do so. Step 2 involves reopening more things, like schools and some retail. And using our test and trace system to keep R down. We will only move to step 2, and then in due course to step 3, when it is safe to do so.

Next slide please.

It is important that we stay alert and think about what we can all do to control the spread of this virus. This means, of course, staying at home as much as is possible and working from home if you can.

It means:

- hygiene: washing your hands and cleaning surfaces remains absolutely crucial
- distance: staying 2 metres apart wherever possible
- protection: wearing face coverings on public transport and in shops
- and self-isolating altogether if you have symptoms

And as we approach a bank holiday weekend, we must all renew our efforts. Over the course of this pandemic, people all across the UK have been making difficult but vital sacrifices for the greater good. So let's not go back to square one.

We can all play our part in the national effort, getting R down and keeping R down, and controlling the virus so we can restore more of the things that make life worth living.

As we follow our plan, our testing regime will be our guiding star. It is the information that helps us to search out, and defeat the virus.

Over the past few months, we have built a critical national infrastructure for testing on a massive scale. We have already put in place the building blocks. We have developed the test, we've built the test centres and the lab capacity, we've created the home testing kits.

All this gives us clarity and confidence for the long term. We hit 100,000 tests a day on time. When we said we would. But we are always striving to go further.

To expand our testing capacity, and to improve our understanding of this virus, there are 2 developments that I wanted to share with you all today.

The first is around swab tests, these are the results that tell you if you currently have coronavirus. As I announced on Monday, anybody over 5 who has symptoms is now eligible for a test.

Getting the test is important. But getting a quick result is important too. We are working hard on innovative developments that I wanted to bring you up to speed with.

It's really important to be clear about this. Working with innovative science always has its risks. Like all R&D, lots of the projects don't come off.

For instance, like vaccines, where we don't know if we'll ever get one, I'm prepared to back innovative developments even if they might never happen. And I think it's worth it, especially in these circumstances, to back things before you know for sure if they're going to work, and I make no apologies for that.

We are working with many top names to help us deliver testing with a rapid turnaround – names like Oxford Nanopore and Chronomics and DNA Nudge.

For example, one innovative company, Optigene, has produced an early test which is being trialled from today. It is interesting to us because it is so fast. It doesn't need to be sent to a lab to be processed and so you get the result on the spot, typically within around 20 minutes.

It's already proven effective in early trials and we want to find out if it will be effective on a larger scale. And we want to support companies like Optigene, and others, to develop these sort of innovative projects. We will monitor its effectiveness very closely. And if it works, we will roll it out as soon as we can.

Now this is just one of a number of innovative testing technologies that we are pushing forward, as fast as the science allows. I will leave no stone unturned and I want to thank everybody involved for their dedication.

The second development I wanted to share today is around antibody tests. These tell you if you have had the virus and have developed antibodies in response, that might help you to fight the virus in the future.

COVID-19 is a new virus and we are learning more about it every single day. I want to be frank with you about what we don't know, as well as what we do know. We are not yet in a position to say that those who test positive in these antibody tests are immune from coronavirus.

But as our understanding of the disease improves, the insight these antibody tests provide will be crucial. They can help us to understand how our bodies react to coronavirus, and how it has spread across the country. We are backing efforts to develop our own homegrown antibody tests through our UK Rapid Test Consortium – and that work is showing some early promise.

And as you know, we have been looking at a whole series of commercial antibody tests. Now many of the early tests were not reliable enough for clinical use. But we have made some available at small scale.

And we have now had the results of our antibody surveillance study. This has told us that around 17% of people in London, and around 5% or higher in the rest of the country, have tested positive for coronavirus antibodies.

This was based on a sample. But for the public at large to know whether or not they have had coronavirus, we need antibody tests at large scale.

Two lab-based tests, produced by Roche Diagnostics and Abbott Labs, have been given a positive evaluation by PHE and approved by the MHRA. And 3 further tests are being assessed right now. And I can announce today that we have signed contracts to supply in the coming months, over 10 million tests from Roche and Abbott.

From next week, we will begin rolling these out in a phased way. At first, to health and care staff, patients and residents.

The UK government has arranged supplies of these 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 locally. This is an important milestone. And it represents further progress in our national testing programme.

It's not just about the clinical advances that these tests can bring, although, obviously, that's important. It's that 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.

We are developing this critical science, to know the impact of a positive antibody test. And to develop the systems of certification to ensure people who have positive antibodies can be given assurance about what they can safely do.

History has shown that understanding an enemy is fundamental to defeating it. And 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 against our common foe. One action that each and 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.