

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 27 May 2021

Good afternoon and welcome to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing.

I'm joined by Dr Jenny Harries, Chief Executive of UKHSA, the UK Health Security Agency.

Every day, we are unwavering in our focus to protect life and keep our nation safe from this deadly virus. And today, I'd like to bring you up to speed on our response, starting with the latest data.

The latest data show that the number of cases is now rising.

Yesterday we saw 3,542 new cases, the highest since 12 April. The variant first identified in India – B.1.617.2 – is still spreading, and the latest estimates are that more than half, and potentially as much as three quarters, of all new cases are now of this variant.

As we set our roadmap we always expected cases to rise. We must remain vigilant.

The aim is to break the link to hospitalisation and death so that cases alone no longer require stringent restrictions on people's lives.

The critical thing to watch is the link from the number cases, to how many people end up in hospital.

The increase in cases remains focused in hotspots, and we're doing all we can to tackle this variant, wherever it flares up.

Over the past 6 months, we now have built a huge testing capacity at our disposal.

And we're using this for surge testing in the 8 hotspot areas, and in other places where cases are lower, but rising.

In the hotspot areas, we're surging vaccines too, for those who are eligible.

In Bolton, for instance, we've done 17,147 vaccinations in the last week.

All the available evidence shows that the best way to protect yourself, your loved ones and your community against this new variant is to get both jabs.

Of the 49 people who are in hospital with COVID in Bolton, only 5 have had both vaccine doses.

Earlier today I spoke this afternoon to Fiona Noden, CEO of Bolton Foundation Trust, and her message is very clear.

The hospital is functioning well and is open to all those who need it.

But people need to be careful and cautious and follow the rules, and take personal responsibility to help to slow the spread.

She also said that, and I quote: "I dread to think where we'd be without the vaccine, so please ask people to come forward and get the jab".

So, when you get the call, get the jab and make sure you come forward for your second dose so you can get the maximum possible protection.

The vaccine is severing the link between cases and hospitalisations, and deaths from coronavirus.

This week's ONS data shows that 3 in 4 adults now have COVID-19 antibodies, including over 90% of people aged 50 and above. This means the vast majority of those most vulnerable to this virus have that protection that antibodies provide.

But I want to see those rates climb further. Having 3 in 4 adults with antibodies is important but there's more still to do.

And today's data from Public Health England show why this is important. They have estimated that over the last week, the vaccination programme has prevented a further 200 deaths and prevented a further 600 people from going into hospital.

Bringing these figures together, it means that in total 13,200 deaths have been prevented, and 39,700 hospitalisations by the vaccination programme.

The case for getting the jab has never been stronger and we're putting jabs in arms as quickly as humanly possible.

We've given in fact 4.1 million vaccines over the past week, which is the highest figure since March.

And I'm delighted to see how this is rolling out to different parts of the country. Thanks to the incredible hard work of colleagues across the Midlands – including Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, NHS colleagues right across the Midlands, and so many others – we've today hit the milestone of 10 million vaccines being delivered across the Midlands.

In the South West, where I was earlier this week, visiting vaccination centres as far flung as the Isles of Scilly, over 5 million doses have been delivered.

Three quarters of adults in the South West have now had their first dose.

And over half have had both doses. This is the highest proportion in the country.

All in all this rapid progress in the roll-out of vaccines in this race between the virus and the vaccines – this rapid roll-out means yesterday we were able to open up vaccinations to all those aged 30 and above.

And I would urge everybody to come forward.

Next week, I'll be hosting the G7 health ministers at the health ministers summit in Oxford.

Oxford has been at the cutting edge of science during this pandemic. They led the RECOVERY trial that uncovered treatments that have saved millions of lives across the world, and of course they developed the Oxford vaccine, which is Britain's gift to the world. That has now been deployed, without any profit margin, to 450 million doses across the world.

Today, I can update you that half a million people here have now signed up to our Vaccine Research Registry. The Vaccine Research Registry is about having a group of people who are prepared to take part in clinical trials. They have signed up to say they are ready and willing to take part.

This is important because our world-leading position in the discovery of new medicines relies on these clinical trials. I'm incredibly grateful to the half a million people who are all playing their part

Today, I can announce that, together with CEPI, the global vaccination effort, we've funded the expansion of another important Oxford study which is the first in the world to look at whether different vaccines can be safely used as part of a 2-dose regime.

Using different vaccines, if they can be mixed without reducing effectiveness – or indeed mixed and lead to an increase in effectiveness – then this could have a huge impact in speeding up vaccination campaigns all across the world and getting more people the protection that is needed from this deadly virus.

It has the potential to transform lives globally and it's brilliant, frankly, to see that, once again, research that is taking place on our shores and our universities is leading the way.

One of the most promising areas of new research is into antivirals.

The thing about antivirals is that you can give them to people in an area of an outbreak to reduce their chance of catching COVID if they come into contact with somebody who has got it.

So, for instance, you can use antivirals to help suppress an outbreak.

These antivirals are not yet approved, and the Prime Minister has set the goal of having 2 available later this year.

Antivirals can treat people early, preventing a mild disease becoming something much more serious and can be used as a prophylactic, preventing the virus from spreading.

I'm absolutely determined that our Antivirals Taskforce will channel the same positive, can-do, collaborative spirit that worked so successfully for vaccines.

I'm pleased to be able to announce that Eddie Gray has been appointed as Chair. Eddie brings a wealth of experience from his time at GSK and at Dynavax and I know Eddie will make a huge contribution at this time of national need.

Our response to this pandemic is been a big team effort and Eddie's leadership will help make our team stronger still.

It's this team – this collective endeavour that you've been a part of – that has got us this far. But this pandemic is not yet over.

So please, keep doing your bit.

Remember the basics: hands, face, space and fresh air get your rapid, regular tests, and when you get the call, get both jabs.

Now I'd like to hand over to Dr Harries to talk through the latest data in a bit more detail.