

# Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 8 February 2021

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

I'm joined by the Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, and by NHS England's Medical Director for Primary Care Dr Nikki Kanani.

Before I update you on our coronavirus response, I'd like to take you through the latest data.

There are still 29,326 patients with COVID in hospital across the UK – still more than at either the April or November peaks.

And sadly, 841 deaths have been reported on average each day over the past week.

My thoughts are with everyone who has lost a loved one to this deadly disease.

Today, I'd like to update you on 3 important parts of the coronavirus response.

## **Vaccines**

First, the next steps on the vaccination programme.

It's now 2 months since that wonderful day when Margaret Keenan got her first jab, the first person in the world to be vaccinated with a clinically authorised vaccine for coronavirus.

We've now vaccinated as of today more than 12.2 million people.

That's almost one in 4 of all adults across the United Kingdom.

Take-up of the vaccine so far has been significantly better than we hoped for.

Based on the work we'd done before the vaccination programme started, and looking at the surveys, we knew that the UK had one of the most positive attitudes to vaccine uptake.

But even so, we thought we'd get take-up of around 75%.

I'm really pleased to be able to tell you that, as of midnight last night, among the over 80s, we've now given a first dose to 91%; among those aged between 75 and 79, it's 95%. And almost three-quarters of those aged between

70 and 74, who were the most recent group to be invited.

We've also visited every eligible care home with older residents, and offered vaccinations to all their residents and staff.

So among eligible care home residents, the take-up is 93%.

But we'll not rest until we vaccinate all those in the most at-risk groups.

Because vaccines save lives. They protect you, and there's increasing evidence they protect those around you too.

The fewer people who are left unprotected, the safer we'll all be and the more securely we'll be able to release restrictions when the time is right.

I've been thrilled to see so much enthusiasm about coming forward for a jab, and I'm just so pleased that take-up has been so high.

But we're not going to rest until all those who are vulnerable have been protected.

So the NHS, and local authorities, and the teams working with them are doing everything they can to reach the remaining people in these groups and we'll keep on searching for those final few per cent, even as we expand the offer of a vaccine to younger age groups.

I'm going to ask Dr Kanani to say a few words more about this project in a moment.

We're on track to meet our goal of offering a vaccine to everyone in priority groups 1 to 4 by the 15th of February – one week today – before moving onto the other JCVI priority groups.

The NHS has worked hard to contact everyone in groups 1 to 4.

But we want to be certain.

So, from today, I have a message for everyone aged 70 and above.

Until now, we've said please wait for the NHS to contact you.

But now that message is changing.

If you live in England, and are 70 and over, and have not yet got an appointment to get vaccinated please contact the NHS.

The easiest way is to do this is through the National Booking Service, online at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk).

Or if you can't get online then you can call 119 or you can speak to your local GP practice.

If you're in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, we are also on track, working together to meet the goal by the 15th February, and your local health

team will be in touch.

I'm so grateful to the whole team who are delivering this vaccination programme so brilliantly across the whole United Kingdom.

And to everyone who's doing their bit, by baring their arms, and getting the jab.

## Testing

While we use our vaccination programme to go on the offensive against this virus, it's very important we keep our defences up as well.

Our testing programme has also grown at a blistering rate.

We're now carrying out, on average, 4.5 million tests every single week.

NHS Test and Trace is returning 97% of in-person test by the next day contact tracing is performing incredibly well, reaching over 97% of contacts where details are given – and 98% of those they're reaching within 24 hours.

I want to say a massive thank you to the NHS Test and Trace, who have built this extraordinary capability almost from scratch.

Even in lockdown, testing to find out where the virus is, is critical to break the chains of transmission and to find those positive cases so people isolate and stop the spread.

Today I'm delighted to be able to announce another step forward, to bolster our on-shore test manufacturing capacity.

We're joining forces with the Derby-based manufacturer Surescreen, to deliver 20 million rapid tests, which can produce results in 30 minutes.

They'll be used in our asymptomatic testing programme to identify the around one in 3 people who get the virus without any symptoms at all yet can still pass it on.

This expanded capacity means we can offer more regular testing to even more people.

Many employers are already taking up our offer of rapid, regular workplace testing which has protected critical workers like in the NHS and schools, so they can keep going.

Employers who've introduced workplace testing tell me that they find it useful for early identification of people who have COVID and so the number of outbreaks reduces as time goes on and so lowers the number of people who are off work with COVID. This is a really important part of what we want to do.

Now, from today, we're expanding the offer of regular workplace testing to all businesses with over 50 employees, in sectors that are currently open.

Testing will become even more important as we exit lockdown, when the time is right.

For now of course, you must work from home if you can.

But if you can't, we want to make sure we're providing as much certainty and confidence as possible. I'd urge all eligible employers to take up this offer. You can go online to the portal at [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://gov.uk/coronavirus).

And this will all help to keep vital services going, and to keep the virus on the back foot.

## **New variants**

The third thing I want to touch on is our work to tackle new variants.

All viruses mutate over time. And part of controlling any virus is responding to new variants as they arise.

We do this every year with flu, for instance.

Knowing this, we invested in genomic sequencing capability right at the start of this pandemic genomic sequencing is how you identify new variants giving the UK one of the biggest genomic sequencing capabilities in the world.

In fact we've provided almost half of global COVID sequencing.

This genomic capacity has allowed us to spot variants here at home and is allowing us to support others to detect variants in other parts of the world.

We musn't let a new variant undo all of the good work that the vaccine rollout is doing to protect people.

Now, the first line of defence is to spot and suppress new variants aggressively wherever they're found.

Hence the tougher measures at the border and the firm action we're taking in those small number of areas where variants of concern have been found in the community Including door-to-door communications, and enhanced testing and sequencing.

At the same time, since the emergence of variants of concern late last year, we've been working on how vaccines can be used to tackle them.

It is imperative that our vaccination programme keeps pace with any changes to this virus.

And Professor Van-Tam will be saying a little bit more about what we're doing.

The work has 3 parts.

First, the evidence is that the existing vaccines have some effect against

new variants particularly preventing serious illness and mortality so the existing vaccine rollout is mission critical for tackling new variants too.

Second, we're working with the existing vaccine suppliers on potential booster jabs, targeted specifically at the new variants, to strengthen this protection further.

Third, we're building on-shore UK capacity, including cutting edge mRNA technologies to give us the ability rapidly to develop and deploy vaccines against any new variants, or similar new diseases, in the future.

We've entered into a new partnership with the vaccine manufacturer CureVac to develop vaccines that can be quickly adapted as new strains are identified just as we do for the flu vaccine every year.

I'm determined that we build this capacity right here securely here in the UK.

To protect everyone across these islands, not just from new variants but for the long term too.

We've agreed an initial supply of 50 million doses, to add to the 400 million doses that are already in our vaccine portfolio so we'll be prepared for whatever the future might bring.

Of course, the fewer new cases of coronavirus that we have, the lower the chance of a new variant appearing domestically.

So the essential message to stay at home and follow the social distancing rules is our best defence right now.

Taking all this together, what I want to say is this.

The number of people in hospital is still far too high, but it is falling. The number of deaths is far too high, but that is falling too. We're turning a corner in our battle against coronavirus.

The vaccine rollout is going well – and if you're aged 70 and over and haven't been contacted yet, please get in touch now.

And all the time, we must be vigilant and do what it takes to tackle any new variants that arise.

For now, the most important thing you can do is: get the jab when your time comes.

Stay at home, protect the NHS, and save lives.