

# Health Secretary's oral statement to Parliament on COVID-19

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to update the House on the COVID-19 pandemic.

We're working night and day to understand more about the Omicron variant.

There's a lot still to learn, but some important data has emerged very recently and I'd like to update the House on the latest developments.

Mr Speaker, there are three reasons why the Omicron variant is a threat.

The first is that it's far more transmissible than the Delta variant.

The Delta variant was much more transmissible than the Alpha variant and we're confident that Omicron is significantly more transmissible than Delta.

We can see this most starkly when looking at how many days it takes for the number of infections to double for each variant.

For Delta, this was around every seven days but for Omicron, based on the latest data from here and around the world, our latest analysis is that it's around between two and a half and three days.

Mr Speaker, this has made the virus an even more formidable foe.

The rate of growth in S-gene drop out cases in England is similar to that observed in South Africa.

Although there are only 568 confirmed Omicron cases in the UK, we know that the actual number of infections will be significantly higher.

The UK Health Security Agency estimates that the number of infections will be around 20 times higher than the number of confirmed cases and so the number of infections is closer to 10,000.

UKHSA estimate that at the current observed doubling rate of between two and a half and three days by the end of this month infections could exceed a million.

Second, severity.

We don't yet have comprehensive data on the severity of this virus but rising rates of hospitalisation in South Africa show that it certainly has the potential to cause harm, and this is a country where the average age is 13 years lower than in the UK, where they have a high level of antibodies from natural infection, and where it's currently the middle of their summer.

Even if severity is lower or the same as Delta, high transmissibility means

the Omicron variant can still have a severe impact with the threat of more hospitalisations and unsustainable pressure on the NHS.

This wouldn't just mean an impact on Covid treatment but the non-Covid care that we all rely on such as emergency care if somebody was sadly involved in a serious accident.

When we set out Plan B, we said we'd act if the NHS was likely to come under unsustainable pressure and would stop being able to provide the care and treatment that people need.

The Omicron variant has given us cause for concern.

Third, we've been looking closely at what the Omicron variant means for our vaccination programme.

New laboratory data which has emerged in the last 24 hours suggests that there is lower immunity against Omicron from vaccination, when compared to the Delta variant so that two doses of a vaccine is less effective at reducing transmission in the community.

Early research published today by Pfizer suggests that a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine neutralised the Omicron variant to levels that are similar to the impact of two doses against the original strain of the virus.

So it's more important that we get our boosters than ever, available for all those eligible, and keep strengthening the defences that we've built.

Today we've opened booster bookings to seven million more people in England.

So people aged 40 and over – and those in high-risk groups – will be able to get their booster jab from three months after their second dose.

Another defence is new treatments which have a huge part to play in protecting the most vulnerable from Covid-19, especially for those who are immunosuppressed and so vaccines may be less effective.

Today, we've announced plans for thousands of people across the UK to be among the first in the world to access life-saving antivirals through a new national study.

People who are at highest risk from the virus for example, those who are immunocompromised or cancer patients, will also be able to access treatments outside this study from next Thursday if they have a positive PCR test.

Mr Speaker, we have built some powerful defences.

We've put more boosters in arms than any country in Europe.

We've built a huge nationwide infrastructure for testing.

And we're leading the world in the deployment of new treatments.

Thanks to these defences and our decision to open in the summer rather than

the winter, we're much better protected than we were this time last year and we need this protection now more than ever.

Because although Omicron is becoming more and more prevalent over the next few days and weeks, we'll be seeing Delta and Omicron variants circulating together.

Facing these twin threats without these pharmaceutical defences would have been hard enough but even with them in place, we still face a perilous winter and so unfortunately, we need to take steps against the threat of this new variant.

When we were moving down our road to recovery, we looked at four tests to see whether we should proceed to the next stage.

That the vaccine deployment programme continues successfully.

That the evidence shows vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths in those that are vaccinated.

That infection rates don't risk a surge in hospitalisations which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS.

And that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new Variants of Concern.

Unfortunately, the situation is markedly different now to how it was in the summer, when we were able to open up and so we must take proportionate steps to meet this emerging threat.

Mr Speaker, these are not measures that any of us want to take.

But it's these measures that give us the best chance of saving lives and protecting our freedom over the next few weeks and it's precisely because we don't want a lockdown that we're putting these proportionate steps in place now.

As we've seen before, if we act early, firmly and decisively, and come down hard on this new Omicron variant now then we can avert tougher action later.

I know that the news of further measures will be disappointing for many people and that every measure comes with a cost.

I can assure the House that as we've made these decisions, we've taken a wide-ranging view.

Looking not just at the impact on the NHS – both in terms of Covid and non-Covid care but also the impact on the nation's education, economy, life chances and mental health. Mr Speaker, I'd like to update the House on the measures we will now take to enact Plan B.

First, guidance on working from home.

We will be reintroducing this guidance.

It will be updated to say that only people who cannot work from home should continue to go into their workplace.

We know that this has an important play in slowing transmission, both at workplaces and on public transport. Second, certification.

We will be introducing mandatory certification, based on vaccines or tests, in nightclubs and large events.

This will reduce the number of unvaccinated, infectious people in venues which could limit overall transmission.

Third, face coverings.

We'll be extending the legal requirement for shops and public transport to all indoor public settings including attractions and recreation although hospitality will be exempt and we'll be exempting specific activities where it is not possible or practical to wear a face covering, for example singing and exercise.

We'll be laying these regulations tomorrow, to come into force the following day.

Fourth, as Omicron spreads in the community, we will also introduce daily tests for contacts instead of isolation so we keep people safe while minimising the disruption to daily life.

Fifth, communications.

We'll be urging caution in all our communications on Covid-19 and keep urging people to get their booster doses and to follow the little steps that can help get this virus under control.

These regulations will be reviewed on the 5th of January, when we will also update the House and they will sunset on the 26th of January.

Finally, Mr Speaker, we'll also be taking further measures to protect and support social care and we'll be updating the House on a package of measures later this week.

Mr Speaker, it's better to stay a step ahead of the virus rather than reacting to what it brings.

Taking control of our response now rather than waiting for what comes next.

Waiting a few weeks would make it easier to explain the need for these measures but then it might well be too late.

So we need to act now and take these balanced and proportionate steps.

Mr Speaker, we take these steps with a heavy heart.

But we do so confident that we're doing everything in our power to keep our nation safe this winter.

We've come so far over the course of this year – thanks to the defences we've built against this deadly virus.

Now, as we face this new threat, we must draw on the same spirit that's got us here, strengthen our defences and think about what we can do to get this virus under control.

I commend this statement to the House.