

# New cutting-edge testing centre to fast-track COVID-19 variant vaccines

- Facility will speed up deployment of vaccines tailored to tackle variants
- Hancock: labs will help “future-proof country from threat of new variants”

Vaccines tailored to tackle COVID-19 variants are to be accelerated through new state-of-the-art labs, Health Secretary Matt Hancock has announced today (Wednesday 5 May).

The government will invest £29.3 million through the Vaccines Taskforce in Public Health England’s new testing facilities at Porton Down, to assess the effectiveness of existing and new vaccines against variants of concern.

The funding will increase the site’s current capacity from 700 to 3,000 blood samples tested a week in order to fast-track variant vaccines. These tests measure the levels of antibodies to COVID-19 that are generated by the vaccines.

The investment will enable Porton Down’s expert scientists to accelerate the pace and scale of specialised testing to support the rapid development of vaccines designed to combat specific mutations of COVID-19.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

The UK has proven itself to be a world-class force in the production of COVID-19 vaccines, with the Oxford/AstraZeneca, Novavax and Valneva vaccines all researched, developed or manufactured on British soil.

We’ve backed UK science from the very start of this pandemic and this multi-million pound funding for a state-of-the-art vaccine testing facility at Porton Down will enable us to further future-proof the country from the threat of new variants.

We are committed to supporting the UK’s flourishing life-sciences industry and this announcement is yet another critical way we will build back better to protect the country over the coming months and years.

While there is promising evidence existing vaccines are effective against variants such as those first identified in Kent and South Africa, work continues to ensure we have a robust programme to test current and potential future variants of concern.

The expanded testing capacity at Porton Down will ensure the UK stays one

step ahead of the virus and is in the best possible position to respond to new threats from COVID-19 as quickly as possible.

The government is working with existing and new suppliers to design vaccines targeted at variants of concern and the Porton Down facility will support this process.

Minister for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment Nadhim Zahawi said:

Our vaccination programme has so far saved thousands of lives, but it's vital we put in place robust support for the programme for the future.

This funding will allow us to increase the testing capacity at Porton Down with a new innovative facility and ensure our COVID-19 vaccines are effective against any future variants of concern.

The UK remains at the forefront of vaccine research and development, and today's announcement will further cement us as a global frontrunner in our future response to COVID-19.

All vaccines being used in the UK have met the independent Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's (MHRA) strict standards of safety, effectiveness and quality.

Dr Jenny Harries, Chief Executive at the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), said:

A new variant that can escape the current vaccines is the greatest risk of a third wave. This new investment will help us stay one step ahead of the virus by doubling our capacity to test vaccine effectiveness against emerging variants.

While we expect the existing vaccines to offer protection against new variants, particularly preventing serious illness and death, it is important that we continue to monitor the picture as it develops.

The best way to prevent the spread of variants is the same as always – follow public health advice and remember hands, face, space.

£19.7 million of investment into the new facilities was originally approved in September 2020 to deliver increased capacity for the clinical testing of vaccines. By January 2022, there will be an increased capacity for testing variant samples from 700 to 1,500 per week.

The government will now be providing an additional £29.3 million to increase capacity for testing variant samples from 1,500 per week to 3,000 once

completed. In total, this equals £49 million of funding for the facilities.

As announced in the Spending Review, the government has made available more than £6 billion to develop, manufacture and procure COVID-19 vaccines.

This funding will also be allocated to manufacturing, research and development and other areas needed to develop vaccines, including fully funding the University of Oxford's clinical trials, as well as funding trials for other vaccines such as Novavax, Janssen and Valneva.

Overall, the UK has secured access to 517 million doses of 8 of the most promising COVID-19 vaccines. These are:

- Pfizer/BioNTech for 100 million doses
- Oxford/AstraZeneca for 100 million doses
- Moderna for 17 million doses
- Janssen for 30 million doses
- Novavax for 60 million doses
- Valneva for 100 million doses
- GlaxoSmithKline and Sanofi Pasteur for 60 million doses
- CureVac for 50 million doses

The newly established UKHSA will bring together the country's cutting-edge health security science capabilities, data analytics and genomic surveillance with at-scale testing and contact-tracing capability – combining key elements of Public Health England with NHS Test and Trace including the Joint Biosecurity Centre.

The new agency will work to protect the country from future health threats and ensure the nation can respond to pandemics quickly and at greater scale.