

PM statement on coronavirus: 12 March 2020

Good afternoon everybody and thank you very much for coming.

I've just chaired a meeting of the government's emergency committee including ministers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

And it's clear that coronavirus, COVID-19, continues and will continue to spread across the world and our country over the next few months. We've done what can be done to contain this disease and this has bought us valuable time.

But it is now a global pandemic.

And the number of cases will rise sharply and indeed the true number of cases is higher – perhaps much higher – than the number of cases we have so far confirmed with tests.

I've got to be clear, we've all got to be clear, that this is the worst public health crisis for a generation.

Some people compare it to seasonal flu. Alas, that is not right. Owing to the lack of immunity, this disease is more dangerous.

And it's going to spread further and I must level with you, level with the British public, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time. And the Chief Scientific Adviser will set out the best information we have on that in a moment.

But as we've said over the last few weeks, we have a clear plan that we are now working through.

And we are now moving to the next phase in that plan.

Because this is now not just to attempt to contain the disease as far as possible, but to delay its spread and thereby minimise the suffering. If we delay the peak even by a few weeks, then our NHS will be in a stronger state as the weather improves and fewer people suffer from normal respiratory diseases, more beds are available and we'll have more time for medical research.

We can also act to stretch the peak of the disease over a longer period so that our society is better able to cope.

The Chief Medical Officer will set out our lines of defence. We have to deploy these at the right time to maximise their effect. The most important task will be to protect our elderly and most vulnerable people during the peak weeks when there is the maximum risk of exposure to the disease and when the NHS will be under the most pressure. So the most dangerous period is not

now but some weeks away depending on how fast it spreads.

Today therefore we are moving forward with our plan. From tomorrow, if you have coronavirus symptoms, however mild – either a new continuous cough or a high temperature – then you should stay at home for at least 7 days to protect others and help slow the spread of the disease.

We advise all those over 70 and those with serious medical conditions against going on cruises and we advise against international school trips.

At some point in the next few weeks, we are likely to go further and if someone in a household has those symptoms, we will be asking everyone in the household to stay at home. We are not introducing this yet for reasons Sir Patrick will explain, but I want to signal now that this is coming down the track.

We are considering the question of banning major public events such as sporting fixtures. The scientific advice as we've said over the last couple of weeks is that banning such events will have little effect on the spread.

But there is also the issue of the burden that such events can place on public services. So we're discussing these issues with colleagues in all parts of the United Kingdom and will have more to say shortly about the timing of further action in that respect.

At all stages, we have been guided by the science, and we will do the right thing at the right time.

We are not – repeat not – closing schools now. The scientific advice is that this could do more harm than good at this time. But we are of course keeping this under review and this again may change as the disease spreads. Schools should only close if they are specifically advised to do so. And that remains our advice.

There is no escaping the reality that these measures will cause severe disruption across our country for many months.

The best scientific advice is that this will help us slow the disease and save lives. There will be detailed information available on the NHS website and from 111 online. But I want to stress something that is very important in the wake of what we're saying this afternoon – I urge people, who think in view of what we're saying about their potential symptoms that they should stay at home, not to call 111 but to use the internet for information if they can.

I also want at this stage to speak directly to older people. Because this disease is particularly dangerous for you, for older people, even though the vast majority this will be a mild to moderate illness, I know that many people will be very worried. And I think we should all be thinking about our elderly relatives, the more vulnerable members of their family, our neighbours, and everything we can do to protect them over the next few months. We're going to need to mobilise millions of people to help and support each other. And I just want to you to know that the government will

do all we can to help you and your family during this period. We're not just going to be as you saw yesterday supporting the economy during this period, we will be providing money and many other forms of support, and helping communities to support each other.

And as we have done over the last few weeks, we will continue to provide, as soon as we have it, as much clear scientific and medical information as we can.

So I'd like to end by repeating the two important messages, with which you will have become familiar – it is still vital, perhaps more vital than ever – that we remember to wash our hands.

And lastly of course even if things seem tough now, just to remember, that we will get through this, this country will get through this epidemic, just as it has got through many tougher experiences before if we look out for each other and commit wholeheartedly to a full national effort.