

Second ground-breaking antiviral to be deployed to country's most vulnerable

- PF-07321332+ritonavir will be made available to those with weakened immune systems from Thursday 10 February
- Innovative treatment reduced the risk of hospitalisation or death by 88% in clinical trials
- The UK has procured more antivirals per head than any other country in Europe with over 4.98m courses ordered so far

Thousands of the country's most vulnerable will be able to access the UK's second ground-breaking antiviral – Pfizer's PF-07321332+ritonavir (Paxlovid®) – from Thursday 10 February, the government has announced today.

Those at highest risk who test positive for the virus – for example, people who are immunocompromised, cancer patients or those with Down's Syndrome – could access PF-07321332+ritonavir directly. The antiviral molnupiravir and monoclonal antibody sotrovimab are already being deployed to the highest risk patients with nearly 10,000 patients being treated to date.

PF-07321332+ritonavir reduced the relative risk of COVID-19-associated hospitalisation or death by 88% in those who received treatment within five days of symptoms appearing – meaning it could potentially save thousands of lives and help to ease burdens on the NHS. This is a significant development for those with compromised immune systems, for whom the vaccine can be less effective.

The government, through the Antivirals Taskforce, has procured 4.98 million courses of antivirals – 2.75 million courses of PF-07321332+ritonavir and 2.23 million courses of molnupiravir – more per head than any other country in Europe.

The PANORAMIC study is currently open and deploying the antiviral molnupiravir to patients. Anyone over the age of 50 or between 18 to 49 with certain underlying health conditions can sign up to the study as soon as they receive a positive PCR or lateral flow test result. They need to be experiencing COVID-19 symptoms that began in the last five days to be eligible to enrol.

Further details on wider deployment – including potentially through the PANORAMIC study run by the University of Oxford and supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) – will be set out in due course.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

Our pharmaceutical defences are crucial as we learn to live with COVID-19 and the UK is leading the way, especially when it comes to the use of cutting-edge antivirals.

This is an important milestone – especially as Paxlovid® has been shown in clinical trials to reduce the risk of hospitalisation or death for vulnerable patients by 88%, meaning potentially thousands of lives could be saved.

We will set out further details on access to the new antiviral soon – until then, anyone who is eligible who tests positive for COVID-19 and has symptoms should sign-up to the PANORAMIC trial for the chance to receive our other antiviral, molnupiravir.

Those in the highest risk group have been informed by the NHS if they have a condition that will make them eligible to receive these treatments, should they test positive for COVID-19.

The eligible cohorts have been determined by an independent expert group commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care and included in a clinical policy agreed by all four Chief Medical Officers in the UK.

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has sent priority PCR tests to around 1.3 million people thus far to support rapid turnaround of results so they can access the treatments as soon as possible after symptoms begin.

Eligible patients who receive a positive test will be assessed over the phone by an expert clinician from an NHS COVID Medicines Delivery Unit (CMDU), who will review and discuss with the patient what the most appropriate treatment would be for them.

Those being prescribed a monoclonal antibody treatment will be invited to attend the CMDU, while those receiving PF-07321332+ritonavir can either get someone to collect it for them or have it delivered to their home. The NHS has been setting up CMDUs since the summer.

NHS National Medical Director Professor Stephen Powis said:

It is fantastic news that this new treatment, the latest cutting-edge drug that the NHS is rolling out through new COVID-19 medicine delivery units, will now be available to help those at highest risk of COVID-19.

Trials have shown it can reduce hospitalisation and risk of death by 88%, meaning we'll be in the best position to save thousands of lives.

While it will still be up to clinicians to decide on a case-by-case basis whether this treatment, or indeed other COVID-19 medicines, is the best choice for their patients, it is an important step in our fight back against COVID-19.

Chair of the Antivirals Taskforce Eddie Gray said:

The UK has secured millions of doses of antivirals for NHS patients, so we can keep the most vulnerable safe from the virus.

This is a promising development in deployment of these treatments. The Taskforce will continue our work to identify the world's best antiviral treatments for UK patients.

Remdesivir will also be rolled out through this route – a broad-spectrum antiviral administered through a drip.

PF-07321332+ritonavir was approved by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in December 2021.