

National testing coordinator warns against unapproved antibody tests

Professor John Newton, national coordinator of the UK coronavirus testing programme, has warned against the purchase of unapproved antibody testing kits and has released a statement.

Antibody tests – designed to detect if people have had the virus and are now immune – are a key part of the government’s strategy to boost testing capacity for COVID-19 to protect the vulnerable, support our NHS, and ultimately save lives.

Several reports have emerged of organisations seeking to purchase antibody tests for their employees, or of individuals purchasing these tests online for personal use. Antibody tests offer hope for people wanting to find out if they have had coronavirus, and are now immune and get back to work. But so far no country in the world, including the UK, has found a reliable antibody test.

Professor John Newton has warned that unapproved tests could be misleading, by providing inaccurate or inconsistent results, potentially putting those tested and those around them at risk.

The government is currently working with several companies who are offering these tests and are evaluating their effectiveness. However, so far, the antibody tests that have gone through the validation process have not proven accurate enough to be rolled out for public use, which is why the government is [backing industry efforts to develop a homegrown test](#).

Until then the government continues to urge everyone to follow the social distancing advice by staying home to protect the NHS and save lives.

Professor John Newton, National Coordinator of the UK Coronavirus Testing Programme, said:

The government, supported by world-leading experts and regulators, is continuing to work hard to rapidly deliver a reliable and accurate back-to-work antibody testing kit, to counter the spread of the virus and enable people to return to work safely. We are breaking new ground with this work every day and I am confident this major research effort will make a breakthrough. Until then, please don’t buy or take any unproven tests. They may not be reliable for your intended use; they may give a false reading and put you, your family or others at risk.

Testing is an important part of our war against coronavirus. At the moment we have swab testing that can tell you if you currently have coronavirus – for these tests a swab sample is taken and analysed in a lab. These tests are available to people in clinical need and

we are also providing them to more and more key frontline workers such as NHS staff and care workers, so that they can stop self-isolating and return to work if the test comes back negative.

There is another kind of test, an antibody test, which is a blood test designed to tell whether people have already had the virus and are now immune. We know they work best around a month after someone has had the virus. These could maybe be done at home with a finger prick, and deliver results in as little as 20 minutes. Such a test could, if developed in such a way that they could be reliably used at home and be sufficiently accurate, be a game-changer.

Right now, however, these antibody tests are brand new and still in development. No country in the world has yet found an antibody test reliable enough to work as a back-to-work diagnostic, but the UK is leading the way in this emerging area of science and technology, and companies and scientists are doing everything they can to improve the accuracy of the tests on the market. As soon as we have found a test that works for this purpose, we will be in a position to roll them out across the country as a back-to-work test.

In the meantime, I advise organisations, both in the public and private sector, against the use of antibody tests that have not been verified in a laboratory setting: and none have. The results of an inaccurate test are potentially misleading and can put people at risk of contracting the disease and transmitting it to others. The Chief Medical Officer has also said he strongly discourages the use of unvalidated tests and that, for now, the social distancing guidelines continue apply to everyone.

[Dairy industry to join together to manage milk supply](#)

The government will temporarily relax elements of UK competition law to support the dairy industry through the coronavirus outbreak.

The intention is that the industry will work together to address current market challenges, avoiding waste and maintaining productive capacity to meet future demand.

With the UK's dairy farmers producing over 40 million litres of milk every day, the legislation, which will be laid shortly, will allow the industry to adapt to changes in the supply chain including decreased demand from the hospitality sector and reduced collection by retailers who have had to close.

The government has already relaxed competition rules to allow retailers, suppliers and logistic services to work together. While this has already allowed the dairy industry to redirect some of their supplies to retailers, today's announcement will enable further collaboration between dairy farmers and producers so they can avoid their surplus milk going to waste and harming the environment.

This could include sharing labour and facilities, cooperating to temporarily reduce production or identifying where there is hidden capacity in the supply chain for processing milk into other dairy products such as cheese and butter.

Dairy UK and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) will now lead work to bring the industry together to identify spare processing capacity, how to stimulate demand and how production could be temporarily reduced.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

Our dairy industry plays a crucial role in feeding the nation and it is essential that they are able to work together at this time.

We've heard loud and clear our dairy farmers' concerns which is why we are further suspending competition rules law to allow dairy farmers to work together on some of the most pressing challenges they are facing. I am also urging farm businesses to access the loans that are available from their bank to support them in this period.

We welcome our farmers' heroic efforts in ensuring food supplies remain resilient and will continue to support them through this difficult time.

The dairy sector is the UK's largest farming sector, with milk accounting for 16.85% of total agricultural output in the UK in 2018.

Of this, approximately 50% of UK dairy sector output is fresh milk and as such accounts for a significant amount of UK processing capacity.

The government encourages any farm business facing difficulties to access the range of support which has been put in place to help businesses manage this challenging period. This includes the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme farming businesses can access. The government has been speaking to the banks and they are ready to support farm businesses as best they can.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

COVID-19 presents an enormous challenge to the country. We must be adaptable and help businesses implement creative solutions to new problems.

Temporarily relaxing competition law for the dairy sector will mean farmers can work together to minimise waste of milk, and use it to make other essential dairy products.

This important step will help our dairy farmers weather this storm, providing support to a key sector in the British economy.

Today's announcement will help ensure this fresh milk does not go to waste, supporting industry to adapt to a temporary reduction in demand by collectively identifying opportunities for processing milk into storable milk products such as butter, cheese and skimmed milk powder.

The UK's food supply chain remains resilient and the Environment Secretary continues to meet regularly with representatives of the food and farming industry to ensure people can get the food and groceries they need.

[Government sets out plans to ensure bereaved families can attend funerals during pandemic](#)

- Councils asked to introduce safe and innovative approaches so that bereaved families can attend funerals
- The government is clear that close family must be allowed to attend funerals in person
- [Guidance published](#) on contingency measures needed by local authorities in managing funerals

Local Government Minister Simon Clarke today (17 April 2020) wrote to all councils in England to ensure that family members can attend the funerals of their loved ones and that the wishes of the deceased are respected during this pandemic.

The government has consistently been clear that it is important that funerals are not delayed and take place in line with social distancing guidelines – to protect both those attending and staff.

In a letter to councils Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP asked all local authorities to work with faith groups and funeral directors to develop safe, sensitive and innovative ways for funerals to take place. He praised

the majority of councils who are already working hard to ensure that family members can attend the funerals of their loved ones and that the wishes of the deceased are respected during this pandemic.

Many councils across the country have already introduced innovative approaches to support the wishes of the bereaved and create the closest experience to a normal cremation or burial as possible whilst keeping crematoria staff and those attending funerals of loved ones safe.

Secretary of State Robert Jenrick MP said:

It is only right that families have a final opportunity to pay their last respects to those they love at this incredibly difficult time.

Close family must be able to attend funerals in person during this pandemic and can safely do so by following in line with social distancing guidelines. We will continue to work closely with councils to ensure that safe and sensitive measures are put in place all across the country.

Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP said:

Nobody wants to have to consider funeral plans for a loved one at this difficult time – but it's important that funerals are not delayed.

Many councils have already put in place innovative arrangements so funerals can take place in a safe and sensitive fashion. I want all councils to consider how best to facilitate funerals so close family can attend and mourn their loved ones in an appropriate way. This will help to ensure that people can be laid to rest with dignity, and that their final wishes and beliefs are respected while we protect the public from the spread of coronavirus.

The government has also published new guidance for councils which outlines contingency measures as set out in Schedule 28 of the Coronavirus Act. These powers allow councils to issue direction if required on whether to bury or cremate someone, to direct crematoria to operate longer hours and to direct funeral directors to have shorter services. The government has always been clear that these will only be triggered in exceptional circumstances if there is a public health risk.

The government has worked closely with faith groups to ensure religious requirements and wishes are considered when making funeral arrangements, including the need for burial or cremation.

Read the [letter from Minister Clarke](#) in full.

The government has not yet designated any emergency powers to a local authority. When any designation is made a notice will be published on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

In this notice, the reasons behind any designation will be clear.

If an area is designated they may be able to direct crematoria to operate longer hours; businesses to use their vehicles to transport bodies or resources; funeral directors to hold shorter services; shorter times for body storage.

View the [Coronavirus Act 2020](#).

[Letter to local authorities to work with faith groups and funeral directors to develop safe, sensitive and innovative ways for funerals to take place](#)

- Only go outside for food, health reasons or work (but only if you cannot work from home)
- If you go out, stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times
- Wash your hands as soon as you get home

Do not meet others, even friends or family.

You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

[Business Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 17 April 2020](#)

Good afternoon. I am joined today by the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance and Dr Yvonne Doyle who is the medical director of Public Health England.

Before I talk about some decisions taken today, and Sir Patrick provides an update on the latest data, I would like to set out the steps we are taking to

defeat coronavirus.

Our step-by-step action plan is aiming to slow the spread of the virus so fewer people need hospital treatment at any one time, protecting the NHS's ability to cope.

At each point we have been following scientific and medical advice and we have been deliberate in our actions – taking the right steps at the right time.

We are also taking unprecedented action to increase NHS capacity by dramatically expanding the numbers of beds, key staff and life-saving equipment on the front-line to give people the care they need when they need it most.

This is why we are instructing people to stay at home, so we can protect our NHS and save lives.

I can report that through the government's ongoing monitoring and testing programme, as of today:

A total of 438,991 people in the UK have now been tested for coronavirus, that includes 21,328 tests carried out yesterday.

Of those, 108,692 people have tested positive.

That is an increase of 5,599 cases since yesterday.

18,978 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in the UK.

And sadly, of those hospitalised with the virus, 14,576 have now died.

That is an increase of 847 fatalities since yesterday.

We must never forget that behind every statistic is a family member or a friend.

And all our thoughts and prayers are with the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives.

These figures are a powerful reminder to us all of the importance of following the government's guidance.

And as the Foreign Secretary outlined yesterday, the current social distancing measures will remain in place for at least the next 3 weeks.

And there are 5 tests that must be satisfied before we will consider it safe to adjust any of the current measures.

First, we must protect the NHS's ability to cope. We must be confident that we are able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment right across the UK.

Second, we need to see a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death

rate from coronavirus, so we can be confident that we have moved beyond the peak.

Third, we need to have reliable data from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) showing that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels across the board.

Fourth, we need to be confident that the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand, with supply able to meet future demand.

Fifth, and most importantly, we need to be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelm the NHS.

The worst thing we could do now, is ease up too soon and allow a second peak of the virus to hit the NHS and hit the British people.

So I want to thank each and every person across the UK who is following and supporting the government's advice to stay at home, in order that we protect our NHS and, ultimately, save lives.

I know we are asking you to make sacrifices. And it is challenging. But we need to keep going. Working together, we will defeat this invisible enemy.

Now is not the time to let up. The risk still persists – not only for yourself, but for the people around you. So we must stay vigilant.

But of course, the point we hope to get to, one of the ways we can defeat this virus, is to find a vaccine.

Just as Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine in the eighteenth century, we need to apply the best of British scientific endeavour to the search for the coronavirus vaccine.

To that end I can announce today, that the government has set up a [Vaccines Taskforce](#) to co-ordinate the efforts of government, academia and industry towards a single goal:

To accelerate the development of a coronavirus vaccine.

This taskforce is up and running and aims to ensure that a vaccine is made available to the public, as quickly as possible.

The taskforce, reporting to me and the Health Secretary, is led by Sir Patrick and Professor Jonathan van Tam.

It comprises representatives from government, industry, academia and regulators.

Members include Government Life Sciences Champion Sir John Bell, as well as AstraZeneca, and the Wellcome Trust.

The taskforce will support progress across all stages of vaccine development, at pace.

It will back Britain's most promising research, positioning the UK as a leader in clinical vaccine testing and manufacturing.

The taskforce will co-ordinate with regulators to facilitate trials which are both rapid and well supervised.

And it will work with industry in the UK and internationally, so we are in a position to manufacture vaccines at scale.

This will build on the Prime Minister's announcement last month of a further £210 million for the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the international fund to find a vaccine.

I can confirm that the government has green lighted a further 21 research projects to help fight coronavirus.

In total, these projects will receive £14 million from a £25 million government research investment and include backing the development of a vaccine at Imperial College London.

This follows support for 6 projects, announced last month, including vaccine development led by Professor Sarah Gilbert at the University of Oxford's Jenner Institute. This is already carrying out preclinical trials and, with government support, will shortly move into a clinical trial phase.

And we are looking forward. So when we do make a breakthrough, we are ready to manufacture it by the millions.

One tool in this fight will be the UK's first Vaccines Manufacturing Innovation Centre based in Harwell.

A project that will help build our capacity to develop and mass produce vaccines here in the UK.

The government will be accelerating the building of this facility.

The Bioindustry Association is also working closely with our taskforce and bringing together a whole range of businesses keen to use their expertise to mass produce vaccines, as soon as one is ready.

I want to pay a heartfelt tribute to all the scientists and researchers, working tirelessly, on these projects.

Yet even with all their efforts, we should be under no illusions.

Producing a vaccine is a colossal undertaking.

A complex process which will take many months.

There are no guarantees.

But the government is backing our scientists, betting big to maximise the chances of success.

I am proud of how, again and again, Britain has stepped up and answered the call to action.

An enormous challenge being tackled through a vast national effort.

Where problem-solvers, from science, business and government join forces to beat this invisible killer.

We cannot put a date on when we will get a vaccine.

But we live in a country with a rich history of pioneering science.

And with the government backing our scientists we have the best chance to do this as quickly as possible.