

UK government secures groundbreaking COVID-19 antivirals

- Treatments to speed up recovery time for COVID-19 patients
- Most vulnerable will be eligible first, including the elderly and those with weakened immune systems

Thousands of vulnerable patients could be taking ground-breaking COVID-19 antivirals this winter after the government announced deals to secure two new treatments.

The deals made by the Antivirals Taskforce are a significant step in its ambition to secure at least two new effective treatments by the end of the year for those who have either tested positive for COVID-19 or have been exposed to someone with the virus.

Should the treatments be approved by the UK's renowned medicines regulator – the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency – thousands of NHS patients will be able to access the treatments to prevent the infection from spreading and speed up recovery time.

The two new antivirals are expected to be given to those most at risk from the virus, helping reduce the severity of symptoms and ease pressure on the NHS over winter.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

Since the beginning of this pandemic, we have been building an armoury of life-saving measures to tackle the virus and protect the country – including our phenomenal vaccination programme and therapeutics.

I am delighted to confirm we may soon have a new defence in our arsenal with two new antiviral drugs that we have secured.

Our work is far from done though – and we'll continue our tireless work to secure more innovative treatments so we can protect as many people as possible from the virus, its variants and future diseases.

The two antivirals are:

- Molnupiravir – from company Merck Sharp and Dohme (MSD), of which the government has secured 480,000 courses. It has proven in clinical trials

to reduce the risk of hospitalisation or death for at-risk non-hospitalised adults with mild to moderate COVID-19 by 50%; and

- PF-07321332/ritonavir – from company Pfizer, of which the government has secured 250,000 courses. Three phase 2/3 trials are currently underway.

The government and NHS are now working at pace on plans for deployment of the treatments, including the delivery of a national study.

This will allow medical experts to gather further data on the potential benefits these treatments bring to vaccinated patients. Further details on the study will be set out in due course.

Before the antivirals can be authorised, they would first need to be evaluated by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), to ensure they meet the regulator's high standards of quality, safety and effectiveness.

Antivirals are treatments used to either treat those who are infected with a virus or protect exposed individuals from becoming infected. They target the virus at an early stage, preventing progression to more severe, or even critical, symptoms.

The Antivirals Taskforce will continue to look at a number of further options, spanning a range of different antiviral mechanisms. Alongside the work of the Therapeutics Taskforce, this will ensure as many people as possible can be protected from COVID-19, future variants and other future diseases.

Chair of the Antivirals Taskforce Eddie Gray said:

This is a very important development in our mission to find antivirals for those exposed to COVID-19, supporting the renowned vaccination programme and the NHS over the coming months.

Should they be approved by the medicines regulator, we could see these treatments rolled out to patients this winter, providing them with vital protection.

Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor Jonathan Van-Tam said:

The COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics that have been rolled out to tens of millions of UK patients have had a critical impact on this pandemic, and antivirals bring another key intervention to the table.

They will be particularly vital in protecting those who may not get the same antibody response to the vaccines as the majority of the population.

We will now work quickly to ensure the right cohorts of people receive these treatments as soon as possible, should they be approved by the MHRA.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the UK has proven itself to be a world-leader in identifying and rolling out effective treatments for COVID-19 – including the world's first treatment dexamethasone, which has since saved 22,000 lives in the UK so far and an estimated million worldwide.

The UK's renowned life sciences sector makes it the ideal base for the brightest of global innovators to research and progress cutting-edge treatments for COVID-19 through the clinical trials process here in Britain.

Professor Stephen Powis, National Medical Director for NHS England, said:

Alongside delivering millions of COVID-19 vaccinations and over four million boosters as part of the biggest and most successful NHS vaccination programme, this new treatment being trialled in a national study will add to the health service's armoury in giving the most vulnerable people the best chance of recovery from this deadly virus, and with cases rising, it is still very much a threat to public health.

Tested and trialled on the NHS these medicines are the latest example of the health service offering patients the world's most innovative treatments, which not only save lives, but could also help reduce the number of people becoming seriously ill with COVID-19, as we head into one of the most challenging winters to date.