

Vaccine rollout and variant mitigation

Earlier this week, we saw one of the greatest milestones in our fightback against this virus, as the number of people who received their first dose ticked over 10 million, and has now surpassed 12 million.

We're now vaccinating at an incredible pace, and during one hour on Saturday we delivered nearly 1,000 jabs a minute across the United Kingdom.

The vaccine is our way out of this pandemic, and it is thanks to the hard work of everyone involved that we have vaccinated over 90% of over 75s and visited every eligible care home possible with older residents in England.

From the moment COVID-19 was identified over a year ago, the global community of researchers, scientists and manufacturers have concentrated all their expertise and their efforts into vaccines and treatments so we can beat this virus.

The emergence of other variants is yet another challenge they are rising to meet.

Our world-leading genomics capacity has allowed us to identify these different strains when they have appeared in the UK. Where we have seen evidence of the South African variant or other worrying mutations, we have moved to deploy surge testing to try and stop it spreading any further.

It is a timely reminder that currently, even with the vaccine rollout going well, we all need to live by the national restrictions and act as if we might have the virus to stop us spreading it.

We have also taken stringent measures to stop new variant cases coming into the country, with travel bans for over 30 countries identified as having the highest risk of importing these variants. This is in addition to the negative test you need to arrive in the country, and the 10-day quarantine you must undertake once you are here.

I know the government is working at speed to introduce a further measure of enforced hotel quarantine for arrivals from high-risk countries to introduce yet another barrier against these variants coming into the UK.

Our brilliant scientists and medical advisers are now working on the potential for new versions of existing vaccines to offer further protections against COVID variants. Last week we announced an agreement with the manufacturer CureVac to allow new varieties of vaccines based on messenger RNA technology to be developed quickly and to procure 50 million doses of a new version of a vaccine, if it is required.

But we should bear in mind that recent studies show the vaccines being deployed right now across the UK appear to work well against the COVID-19 variants currently dominant in the UK. In terms of other variants, not in the UK, we need to be aware that even where a vaccine has reduced efficacy in

preventing infection there may still be good efficacy against severe disease, hospitalisation, and death. This is vitally important for protecting the healthcare system.

While it is right and necessary to prepare for the deployment of an updated vaccine, we can take confidence from the current roll out and the protection it will provide all of us against this terrible disease.

We are ready to protect our most vulnerable and stay a step ahead of the virus, whatever it throws at us.

Thanks to the work you're doing, we're getting safer every day. But even though this programme is accelerating rapidly, this is still a lethal virus that is capable of causing devastation and disruption.

So while the vaccinators do their work, we must all keep following the steps that we know make a big difference: hands, face, space, and if you have symptoms get a test.