



# Clinical trials suspended in UK to prioritise covid-19 studies and free up staff

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New clinical trials are being suspended to prioritise covid-19 studies and enable the redeployment of clinical staff to frontline care, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) has said.

Louise Wood, co-lead for the NIHR, said setting up of new Clinical Research Network (CRN) studies or new sites of ongoing studies would be “paused” so complete focus could be given to delivering research into covid-19.<sup>1</sup>

Trials in the recruitment stage may also be halted, with NHS trusts and health boards making decisions on a case by case basis. One of the trials halted at University College London Hospital NHS Foundation Trust is the ROSCO breast cancer trial examining two tests to guide chemotherapy before surgery for invasive breast cancer.<sup>2</sup>

An NIHR spokesperson said, “Local research and clinical teams will work with patients to minimise impact, especially for patients on interventional trials.”

Studies will continue if halting them will have “significant detrimental effects” on the ongoing care of participants—for example, when there is no other treatment. Around 200 new trials are typically added to the CRN portfolio each month.

So far eight urgent public health response studies into covid-19 are being set up. At the same time, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has published new guidance on managing clinical trials during the pandemic,<sup>3</sup> which includes permitting use of phone calls instead of face-to-face study visits.

In 2018-19, the CRN supported over 6100 studies and recruited over 870 000 participants,<sup>4</sup> working with funding partners such as Cancer Research UK.

Stephen Nabarro, head of clinical operations and data management at Cancer Research UK, said most recruitment has paused for the time being.

He said, “For patients currently on trials, these trials may be more flexible on protocol during this period, finding different ways to get drugs to patients without them coming into a hospital. Patients need to speak to their doctor to find out if this applies to them.”

Aisling Burnand, chief executive of the Association of Medical Research Charities, said the decision will have a serious effect on participants because trials are a “crucial lifeline.”

She said, “We ask that decisions on each trial are made with that impact on patients in mind. These decisions need to be proportionate and communicated transparently and sensitively.”

She added it is the right decision to focus efforts on covid-19. “We know that this decision has not been taken lightly, and has been made with an appreciation of the significant impact it will inevitably have in all areas of research.”

- 1 National Institute for Health Research. DHSC issues guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on research funded or supported by NIHR, updated 19 Mar 2020. <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/news/dhsc-issues-guidance-on-the-impact-on-covid-19-on-research-funded-or-supported-by-nihr/24469>
- 2 Cancer Research UK. A trial looking at 2 new tests to help select chemotherapy before surgery for breast cancer (ROSCO). [https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/find-a-clinical-trial/a-trial-looking-at-2-new-tests-to-help-select-chemotherapy-before-surgery-for-breast-cancer-roscos?\\_ga=2.203128529.1315225976.1584640787-1540015531.1584640787](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/find-a-clinical-trial/a-trial-looking-at-2-new-tests-to-help-select-chemotherapy-before-surgery-for-breast-cancer-roscos?_ga=2.203128529.1315225976.1584640787-1540015531.1584640787)
- 3 MHRA. Managing clinical trials during Coronavirus (COVID-19), 19 Mar 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/managing-clinical-trials-during-coronavirus-covid-19>
- 4 National Institute for Health Research. Clinical Research Network. <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/support/clinical-research-network.htm>

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