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Covid-19: Fully vaccinated patients no longer need to test or isolate before elective procedures, hospitals are told

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Fully vaccinated patients no longer need to have a polymerase chain reaction covid-19 test or to isolate before elective procedures, as long as they have a negative lateral flow test on the day, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has told hospitals.

The recommendation is one of three changes hospitals have been told they can make to the management of covid-19 infection, prevention, and control measures. They can also reduce physical distancing from two metres to one, and readopt standard rather than enhanced cleaning procedures in low risk areas such as planned or scheduled elective care.

UKHSA chief executive Jenny Harries said, “This is a first step to help the NHS treat more patients more quickly, while ensuring their safety and balancing different needs for care.”

The agency pointed to evidence from the World Health Organization, including that there is limited evidence on transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from surfaces, to support the recommendations. It added, however, that all staff working in areas where control measures have been relaxed should be fully vaccinated, asymptomatic, and not a contact of a positive case.

NHS Confederation director of policy Layla McCay said, “The new guidance means an opportunity to increase bed capacity on wards, an increase in patients being seen for a variety of procedures, as well as the ability to transport patients more quickly and efficiently.

“We must remember, however, that covid-19 has not gone away. NHS organisations know this well and will not take their eye off the ball when it comes to infection prevention and control—not least as we approach what we anticipate will be a very difficult winter with the NHS affected by rising infections from covid-19 to flu. The impact of this could lead to some organisations and systems having to adapt their infection, prevention, and control measures again depending on local need.”