



Covid-19: UK government calls on industry to help boost testing capacity to 25 000 people a day

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As many as 25 000 people a day will be tested for covid-19 in NHS hospitals within weeks in a push to increase capacity, the government has said.

The announcement followed a meeting at Downing Street on 17 March, in which the prime minister and the health secretary told industry leaders that they would be given whatever support they needed to help the government boost testing capabilities throughout the country as quickly as possible.

The government's focus will remain on testing the highest priority cases first—namely, patients in intensive care units and those with severe respiratory illness. Ministers said that officials were working to rapidly increase the number of tests that could be carried out by Public Health England and the NHS in laboratories, making the additional capacity available within four weeks.

The UK government has completed over 50 000 tests to date. It said that it hoped to increase testing to 10 000 a day by next week and to 25 000 a day in the coming weeks.

Ministers have also asked companies to work with the government to develop an antibody test to help establish whether people have developed immunity. This would help to get NHS and other critical public sector staff back to work, the Department of Health and Social Care said.

England's health secretary, Matt Hancock, said, "Our aim is to protect life, protect the most vulnerable, and relieve pressure on our NHS—so it is right that we prioritise testing for those most at risk of severe illness. We will always do the right thing at the right time, based on the best scientific advice, and will do whatever it takes to protect life."

The government also wants to introduce a "point of care" swab test to be used away from hospitals, so that people with suspected symptoms can self-test from home to quickly find out whether they have the virus. Ministers have called on the industry to rapidly develop this test, which would not need to be sent away for testing and could give quick results, like a pregnancy test.

Sharon Peacock, director of the National Infection Service at Public Health England, said, "This is a timely boost to the UK's testing capacity, which is a vital element in the battle against the covid-19 pandemic. By working together with industry we can increase the country's testing ability—allowing us to better map the spread of infection in the community and to protect our healthcare workers on the front line of our response."

Since the end of February Public Health England has been running a surveillance programme, testing a random sample of the population at 100 general practices to help officials understand the level of virus circulating in the community.