



Covid-19: government promises 100 000 tests per day in England by end of April

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The government has pledged to carry out 100 000 tests for covid-19 per day in England by the end of April, ramping up its current capacity.

The promise by the health secretary Matt Hancock follows mounting backlash against the government over its failure to boost testing capacity—a matter which has dominated the national news agenda in the UK over the past few days.

In particular, the government's failure to fulfil promises to roll out testing for NHS staff has left medical leaders frustrated,¹ with large numbers of doctors having to self-isolate because they are unsure if they have the virus.

Currently, there are only around 10 000 tests being carried out a day in England, which lags way behind many other developed countries. The government had previously set a target to test 25 000 per day by mid-April.

Setting out details of the pledge at yesterday's daily briefing at Downing Street, Hancock said the increase would be delivered in a "five pillar" plan:

Scale up swab testing in Public Health England laboratories and NHS hospitals for those with a medical need and key workers to 25 000 a day by mid to late April

Deliver increased commercial swab testing for critical key workers in the NHS, later expanding to key workers in other sectors

Develop antibody blood tests, currently being tested for validation, but not yet launched

Conduct surveillance testing to learn more about the virus's spread and help develop new tests and treatments

Build mass testing capacity at "a completely new scale" by working with industry, academia, and the NHS

John Newton, Public Health England's director of health improvement, has been appointed to help deliver the new plans.

The government said that once widespread testing is available, it will prioritise repeated testing of critical key workers. Hancock said that the eventual deployment of antibody tests to see if people have already had the virus would be particularly important in enabling NHS staff to return to work.

But speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Today*, Hancock admitted that the government had tested 150 antibody tests so far, but none were sufficiently reliable. He said, "At the moment we haven't got a reliable home test. We haven't yet found one that works to be good enough to use. With a test that's not high quality, you end up giving false assurance, which can be a really dangerous thing to do."

While wide scale antibody testing may be some way off, Hancock said that the government was conducting 3500 "top quality" antibody tests a week at Porton Down for research purposes, to understand how prevalent the virus was in the population.

Responding to the announcement, Niall Dickson, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said, "NHS and care staff need tests and they need them now. So this plan, not before time, is incredibly welcome. We have too many doctors, nurses, and other staff off work because they do not know if they or a member of their household have the virus or not."

In a separate move the charity Sense About Science has written to the prime minister urging him to "start publishing the government's evolving plans for coronavirus testing." In a letter, signed by more than 100 scientists, it says that "people are frustrated and confused about the scientific and logistical challenges of testing and what the government is doing about it."²

Tracey Brown, director of Sense about Science, said, "People want accountability, even more so as significant changes are being made with implications for livelihoods, behaviour, freedom, and safety. If it's not provided it will be sought out, in ways that may be arbitrary, recriminatory, far more disruptive to public health messages, and far harder to deal with."

1 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: healthcare staff in hotspot areas are prioritised as testing expands. *BMJ* 2020;368:m1318. 10.1136/bmj.m1318 32234831

2 Sense about Science. Call for transparency on evolving test plans. <https://senseaboutscience.org/activities/call-for-transparency-on-evolving-testing-plans>