



Covid-19: Roll out of 10m antibody tests to begin next week, government announces

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The UK government has signed deals with pharmaceutical companies Roche and Abbott to provide 10 million covid-19 antibody tests, with roll out to health and care staff, patients, and residents starting next week.

Making the announcement at the 21 May daily briefing, health secretary Matt Hancock said that this was an “important milestone,” but he highlighted that it was not yet known whether testing positive in these antibody tests meant that a person was immune to the virus.

Hancock also announced that the government would immediately begin trialling a point of care covid-19 test for infectivity which uses saliva, does not require swabs to be sent to the laboratory, and which provides results within 20 minutes.

Both Roche and Abbott’s antibody assays have been evaluated by Public Health England (PHE).¹ Roche’s anti-SARS-CoV-2 serology assay was found to have a specificity of 100%, while the overall sensitivity was 83.87%, rising to 87.0% at 14 days after onset of symptoms, 87.7% 21 days after, and 100% more than 40 days after. Meanwhile, Abbott’s SARS-CoV-2 IgG kit was reported as being 99.63% specific, with a sensitivity of 93.90% at 14 days after symptom onset, dropping to 93.40% at 21 days and 87.5% at 40 days.

Speaking at the briefing, Hancock said, “Two antibody tests produced by Abbott and Roche have been given a positive evaluation by PHE and have been approved by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, and three further tests are being assessed right now. We have signed contracts to supply in the coming months over 10 million tests from Roche and Abbott. From next week we will begin rolling these out in a phased way, first to health and care staff, patients, and residents.”

However, he added that while “we are not yet in a position to say that those who test positive in these antibody tests are immune to coronavirus, they can help us to understand how our bodies react to it and how it has spread across the country.”

The UK government has also arranged supplies of these tests on behalf of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Each administration will have control over how the tests are used.

Commenting on the announcement, associate professor in cellular microbiology at the University of Reading, Simon Clarke, said, “The announcement that NHS and care workers are to be offered antibody tests will allow health authorities to determine how many people working in those environments were asymptotically infected during the recent peak.

“It’s not yet clear who else is thought to ‘need’ the test and why. We currently know very little about post-infection immunity to covid-19, so it could be dangerous to make casual assumptions about the safety of any staff who have antibodies; we don’t know for sure that this will provide effective immunity or how long it would last for.”

During the briefing, Hancock went on to report on the government’s antibody surveillance study. He said, based on a sample of people, around 17% of people in London and around 5% or higher in the rest of the country are estimated to have tested positive for covid-19 antibodies.

He also announced that the government had begun trialling a quick turnaround test, which may be able to tell whether someone is currently infected with the virus within 20 minutes. “OptiGene (a molecular diagnostics company) has produced an early test which is being trialled from today,” he said. “It’s interesting to us because it’s so fast. It doesn’t need to be sent to a lab to be processed, so you get the result within 20 minutes. It has already proved effective in early trials and we want to find out if it will be effective on a larger scale.”

1 Mahase E. Covid-19: Two antibody tests are “highly specific” but vary in sensitivity, evaluations find. *BMJ* 2020;369:m2066. doi:10.1136/bmj.m2066.

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