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Covid-19: Shielding may be reintroduced for vulnerable people in highest risk areas

Gareth Iacobucci

The government may reintroduce advice for clinically extremely vulnerable people to shield from covid-19 if they live in “exceptionally high risk areas” of England.

People at greatest risk of serious illness from the virus—including those with conditions affecting the immune system, certain cancers, and organ transplant recipients—will receive specific advice depending on the risk level in their local area, the government said.

The new locally tailored guidance will be linked to the government’s three tier alert system, which is being introduced this week to try to stem rising covid-19 infections across England.

The government said those living in very high risk areas may once again be advised to formally shield, as they were when national lockdown was introduced in March.¹ This would mean staying at home, not going to work or school, and limiting social interactions to their own household and support bubble to reduce their risk.

Advice to shield will not automatically be given if an area is placed in the very high alert level—as Liverpool has been—but ministers will consider it as an additional intervention based on advice from local public health experts and the chief medical officer or a deputy chief medical officer.

The deputy chief medical officer for England, Jenny Harries, said, “Over the past few weeks we’ve seen a sharp increase in the prevalence of the virus across the country and we know those who are clinically extremely vulnerable are looking for practical advice on how they can carry on their lives while the virus remains in our communities.

“The new system will provide clarity on how best those in this group can keep themselves as safe as possible depending on the rates of transmission in their local area.”

The Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS will write to the 2.2 million people currently identified as clinically extremely vulnerable and their doctors outlining the changes to the guidance. Anyone who is advised to shield in the future will be written to individually.

The government said that if shielding advice is reintroduced, people affected would be eligible for a support package including food access support and medicines deliveries, and may also be eligible for statutory sick pay or Employment and Support Allowance.

Sarah MacFadyen, head of policy at Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation, said, “We need urgent clarity from the government as to how and when people with severe lung disease will be able to access this tailored guidance, particularly those in high and very high alert areas. Crucially, we need answers now for those people who cannot work from home to know how their income will be protected if they are advised not to go into work. More than six months on, people are still being asked to make the impossible choice between health and financial security.”

¹ Kmiotowicz Z. Covid-19: Highest risk patients are asked to stay at home for 12 weeks. *BMJ* 2020;368:m1170. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m1170 pmid: 32205309