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Covid-19: Vaccines will be tested against variants of concern after £29m funding boost from UK government

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The efficacy of different covid-19 vaccines against variants of concern, including those first identified in the UK and South Africa, will be assessed by Public Health England after a funding boost from the government.

The UK government's Vaccine Taskforce has announced £29.3m (€34m; \$40.8m) in extra funding for new facilities at Porton Down in Wiltshire, which will increase the site's capacity for testing variant samples from 1500 to 3000 a week.

This is on top of a £19.7m investment approved last September to increase capacity for clinical testing of vaccines. The government has said that the Porton Down facilities will also be used for work to update existing vaccines to specifically target variants. Data are currently limited on the efficacy of vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 variants, as many of the earlier vaccine trials were carried out before these variants emerged.

Highly effective

A study just reported from Israel found that the two dose Pfizer vaccine was highly effective at reducing cases, hospital admissions, and deaths from covid-19 at a time when 94% of cases tested were the B.1.1.7 variant, first identified in the UK.¹ Research has also found that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is around 75% effective against the B.1.1.7 variant.²

Jenny Harries, chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency, said, "A new variant that can escape the current vaccines is the greatest risk of a third wave. This new investment will help us stay one step ahead of the virus by doubling our capacity to test vaccine effectiveness against emerging variants."

"While we expect the existing vaccines to offer protection against new variants, particularly preventing serious illness and death, it is important that we continue to monitor the picture as it develops."

The UK is set to roll out a third booster vaccine dose in the autumn to certain groups of people for extra protection over the winter. The government said that the final policy on who gets the booster will be informed by advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and by the results of clinical trials assessing the impact of mixing approved covid-19 vaccines.³

1 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: Two doses of Pfizer vaccine are "highly effective" against infection, hospitalisation, and death, study finds. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1164. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1164.

2 Mahase E. Covid-19: Where are we on vaccines and variants? *BMJ* 2021;372:n597. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n597 pmid: 33653708

3 Mahase E. Covid-19: Booster vaccine to be rolled out in autumn as UK secures 60m more Pfizer doses. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1116. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1116 pmid: 33926905

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