



Kent

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o851<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o851>

Published: 30 March 2022

Covid-19: NHS staff will still have access to free tests

Jacqui Wise

NHS and care staff, as well as some vulnerable patients, will continue to have access to free testing for covid-19 in a move that has been welcomed as a victory for common sense.

In February it was announced that free covid testing would end for most people in England from 1 April under the government's *Living with Covid* plan.¹ The BMA and the NHS Confederation have been calling for NHS staff to continue to have access to free testing, and they welcomed the latest decision even though it came at the "11th hour."

England's health secretary, Sajid Javid, has announced that free symptomatic testing will be provided for people living or working in some high risk settings, including staff in the NHS, in care homes and hospices, and in prisons and places of detention.² People will also be tested before being discharged from hospital into care homes, hospices, homelessness settings, or domestic abuse refuges.

Free symptomatic testing will also be provided for patients in hospital, where a PCR test is required for patient care, and to provide access to treatments and support ongoing clinical surveillance for new variants. Patients with a higher risk of getting seriously ill from covid will also be contacted directly and sent lateral flow tests to keep at home for use if they have symptoms.

Under the plans asymptomatic lateral flow testing will continue from April in "some high risk settings where infection can spread rapidly while prevalence is high." This includes patient facing NHS staff, as well as NHS commissioned independent healthcare providers, staff in hospices and adult social care services, a small number of care home visitors who provide personal care, some prison staff, and staff in high risk domestic abuse refuges and homelessness settings. Testing will also be provided for care home staff and residents during an outbreak and for care home residents on admission.

The government said that it had retained the ability to enable a rapid testing response if needed, such as for a new variant of concern. This includes maintaining a stockpile of lateral flow tests and the ability to ramp up testing laboratories and delivery channels.

It added that the Community Infection Survey, delivered by the Office for National Statistics, would continue to monitor infection levels, as would the Vivaldi study in residential care homes, the Siren study in the NHS, and surveillance in primary care by the Royal College of General Practitioners. The government's Therapeutics Taskforce and Antiviral Taskforce will be merged into a single unit.

Roles not segregated

Covid-19 infections and hospital admissions have been rising in recent weeks. However, the government said that over 55% of people in hospital who had tested positive were not there with covid-19 as their primary diagnosis.

Jenny Harries, chief executive of the UK Health Secretary Agency, said, "As we learn to live with covid, we are focusing our testing provision on those at higher risk of serious outcomes from the virus, while encouraging people to keep following simple steps to help keep themselves and others safe."

Under the new guidance from 1 April anyone with symptoms of a respiratory infection including covid-19, who also has a high temperature or feels unwell, should stay at home and avoid contact with other people until they feel well enough to resume normal activities and no longer have a high temperature.

The BMA said it was a relief that ministers had abandoned plans to scrap testing for healthcare workers altogether but that restricting testing to those in patient facing roles ignored the reality of working life.

Chaand Nagpaul, BMA chair of council, said, "Staff in patient facing roles or otherwise are not segregated and therefore can easily spread infection between each other. By artificially making this distinction we also risk pushing up staff absence rates, which are already impacting on services and patient care.

"We are also concerned that the guidance states free testing can occur when there is a 'high prevalence' of infection—but there is no clarity in the statement on the definition of a 'high prevalence.' This needs to be made clear as soon as possible, given the current high infection rates across society."

Two tier society

The BMA is also concerned that elderly people are not included in the group given access to free testing, nor those who come into contact with vulnerable people. It also warned that there was no provision for free testing based on affordability and that this risked creating a two tier society based on who could afford to pay for tests.

Welcoming the decision, Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said, "Health leaders will be relieved that the government has seen sense and confirmed at the 11th hour that NHS staff in patient facing roles will continue to have access to free testing against covid-19. This is a victory for common sense."

Saffron Cordery, deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, also welcomed the decision but said that it had come late in the day. "Rising covid cases are

putting increased pressure on NHS services, which also face high staff absence rates,” she said. “This is having a knock-on impact on how fast trusts can deliver backlog recovery.”

Cordery added that the end of universal free testing could affect the ambition to reduce health inequalities. “There is a risk that we may see a two tier system where those who cannot afford to pay for tests are at greater risk of catching the virus. No one should have to make a choice between their health or heating,” she said.

- 1 HM Government. Covid-19 response: living with covid-19. Feb 2022. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1056229/COVID-19_Response_-_Living_with_COVID-19.pdf
- 2 Department of Health and Social Care. Government sets out next steps for living with covid. 29 Mar 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-next-steps-for-living-with-covid>

This article is made freely available for personal use in accordance with BMJ's website terms and conditions for the duration of the covid-19 pandemic or until otherwise determined by BMJ. You may download and print the article for any lawful, non-commercial purpose (including text and data mining) provided that all copyright notices and trade marks are retained.