

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 27 May 2020

Coronavirus press conference (27 May 2020)

Good afternoon and welcome back to Downing Street for the daily coronavirus briefing.

I am joined by Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, and by Baroness Dido Harding, the Chair of NHS Improvement and of our Test and Trace programme.

Today we formally launch the NHS Test and Trace service. This is an incredibly important milestone for the country that I know people will want to hear about.

Before I do, I'd like to update you on the latest coronavirus data:

- 3,798,490 tests have now been carried in the UK, including 117,013 tests yesterday
- 267,240 people have tested positive, which is an increase of 2,013 cases yesterday
- of those who tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 37,460 people have sadly died
- and since yesterday, 412 deaths have been recorded

We mourn them and we will not forget them.

As I said yesterday, thanks to your effort and sacrifice we are past the peak. We've flattened the curve, we've protected the NHS.

And the big question that we're all working to answer is this:

Until an effective treatment or vaccine comes through, how can we get back to doing more of the things that make life worth living without risking safety or putting lives at risk?

NHS Test and Trace is a big part – not the only part – but a big part of the answer to that question.

NHS Test and Trace means we can start to replace the national lockdown with individual isolation for those who've been in contact with the virus and local action where it's necessary to respond to a flare up.

The concept is simple. First, through testing, we hunt down the virus, finding out who is infected right now.

And I use 'we' very deliberately. Because we all have our part to play. This

is a national effort and we all have a role. If you have symptoms, you must isolate immediately and get yourself a test.

Yesterday, 2,013 people tested positive.

And the next step is that through contact tracing, like detectives, the NHS clinician from NHS Test and Trace and the person who's tested positive work together to identify the possible movements of the virus, where it's been and who else it might have infected.

Then we isolate those contacts who might have been infected so the virus is unable to spread. And we break the chain of transmission.

Think of it like this. The virus exists only to reproduce. That is its sole biological purpose: to make as many copies of itself as possible.

If we can thwart that purpose, we can control the virus and ultimately defeat it.

We must all follow the NHS Test and Trace instructions, because this is how we control the virus and protect the NHS and save lives.

Some people have asked why now? Why not launch this programme earlier in the course of the pandemic?

The answer is because we needed to flatten the curve.

Right at the start of this epidemic, we had a contact tracing system in place.

But, as the virus raged towards its peak, the number of infections grew so large that we needed a national lockdown. This was the only way to get it under control.

Effectively, everyone in the country was contacted and told to stay at home.

Now we've got the number of new infections each day right down, the number of contacts of those who've tested positive is small enough that we can be in touch with everyone we need to.

And, of course, testing capacity is critical to making this work.

We now have the capacity for 161,000 tests a day. And, because of that increased capacity, I can announce that we're expanding eligibility yet further.

From tomorrow, we are expanding eligibility for testing to include the under-5s so that now every single person who has symptoms of coronavirus can get a test, no matter their age.

And, what's more, to make NHS Test and Trace as effective as possible, it is very important that everyone with symptoms must isolate immediately and go and get a test.

Now, I want to thank and pay tribute to everyone involved in making this big project happen.

Dido Harding who has led the work, the technicians in the labs making mass-testing a reality, the contact tracers manning the phones, the healthcare staff providing expert advice and the companies who've helped us put it together at record scale and pace.

And what really matters is this. To protect your friends and your family, testing and tracing must become a new way of life.

This is being launched today in England.

Northern Ireland already has a system in place and my colleagues in the Scottish and Welsh governments are working to bring in a system as soon as they can. All 4 nations have been working together to make sure we have systems that are co-ordinated across the whole country.

And the instructions to people are clear:

- If you get symptoms, isolate immediately and get a test
- If you are contacted by NHS Test and Trace instructing you to isolate, you must

It is your civic duty, so you avoid unknowingly spreading the virus and you help to break the chain of transmission.

This will be voluntary at first, because we trust everyone to do the right thing. But we can quickly make it mandatory if that's what it takes.

Because, if we don't collectively make this work, then the only way forward is to keep the lockdown.

Put better, the more people follow the instructions, the safer we will be and the faster we can safely lift the lockdown.

So, do it for the people you love. Do it for your community. Do it for the NHS and do it for all those front line workers, who've gone out every day and put themselves at risk to keep you and your family safe.

And in return for following those instructions, you'll have the knowledge that, when the call came, you did your bit at a time when it really mattered, when the whole country, who are desperate to see their families, were counting on you to do the right thing. You did your bit to bring us all closer together, and closer to that day when we will be reunited.

This system will start tomorrow morning at 9am and the first people who will be contacted will be the people who received a positive result today.

This is a very distinct change on our approach and I just want to take a moment to recap the extent of the change.

Today, we say 'isolate' to anyone with coronavirus symptoms and their

households. This remains vital.

From 9am tomorrow, in addition, if you are contacted by NHS Test and Trace advising you to isolate, then you must do that, whether you have symptoms or not.

Now, I also know that for those without symptoms who receive that call, I fully acknowledge that this is a big ask and you are going to make a sacrifice.

But this is for a purpose. And that purpose is the safety of everyone. Because we know you can have the virus and spread it to other people without ever having symptoms at all.

And it's not just the safety of all, but the liberty of all that is at stake here.

We are only in a position to re-open primary schools and outdoor markets – if they're COVID-secure – this coming Monday because we've flattened the curve and now we have this system in place.

In the coming weeks, we will gradually and very carefully move away from a lockdown that is national in scope, blanket in application and start moving towards a system that is much more targeted in scope and focuses local action on tackling local flare-ups.

This will help us to restore some of the basic freedoms that matter so much to people, and doing some of the things that people are yearning to do, like seeing friends and family, booking a holiday or getting a haircut, all while controlling the virus and keeping people safe.

It is a brand new service on a scale never seen before. There will be bumps in the road and we will constantly improve it.

And in the weeks ahead we will ramp up the service still further. And once the system's bedded in we will roll out the NHS Contact Tracing App that is being piloted in the Isle of Wight.

And, of course, NHS Test and Trace is only one part of the answer, it's not the whole answer.

All of the action we're taking to get R down and keep R down, it all requires us to keep doing the right thing.

Testing and tracing will help us to hunt down this virus. It is one of the tools with which we can finish the job and we all need to play our part.

So please, stay alert, control the virus and save lives.