



# Covid-19: UK could delay non-urgent care and call doctors back from leave and retirement

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Healthcare staff on leave and those who have retired could be called “back to duty,” and non-urgent care could be delayed, as doctors are forced to prioritise dealing with covid-19, the UK government’s action plan lays out.

The government will also implement a “distribution strategy for the UK’s stockpiles of key medicines and equipment (e.g. protective clothing),” the document said.

However, the plan did not include details of how or when these measures would be put in place.

Speaking at a press briefing at 10 Downing Street on Tuesday 3 March, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, said it was “highly likely that we will see an increase in cases” but that the government was “committed to doing everything possible” to tackle covid-19. He added that the NHS would get “all the support it needs” but did not provide any further information on what this would include or how it would be delivered.

As at 3 March 51 cases of covid-19 had been confirmed in the UK.

Discussing how widespread the virus could become in the UK, England’s chief medical officer, Chris Witty, said that the worst

case scenario was 80% of the population becoming infected, with most people having mild symptoms and recovering. “In reality, the proportion of the population will likely be lower than that, and probably a lot lower than that,” he added.

Witty said that 1% was the current “reasonable” figure for the fatality rate, with that number being higher in vulnerable groups—such as older people and patients with pre-existing conditions—and lower in the younger and healthier population.

When pressed for further details on the government’s plans, Johnson emphasised the importance of acting at the right time and not too early. He said that further information would be released if and when it was needed.

The planning document came as the government announced it had launched a new NHS 111 online service dedicated to giving people quick advice on the coronavirus. Since the launch on 26 February it has provided advice to more than 70 000 users. NHS 111 in England will also be given an initial extra £1.7m to offer more clinical advice over the phone, by adding 500 additional call responders with the capacity to answer around 20 000 more calls every day.