



Covid-19: outbreak could last until spring 2021 and see 7.9 million hospitalised in the UK

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The covid-19 outbreak is expected to last around one year (until spring 2021), with around 80% of the population infected and up to 15% of people (7.9 million) requiring hospitalisation in the UK, a briefing document produced by Public Health England for the government has said.

The document, seen by the *Guardian*, said that, of the five million people deemed vital because of their work “in essential services and critical infrastructure”—including one million NHS staff and 1.5 million social care staff—500 000 could be off sick at any one time.

Overall, at least 10% of people in the UK will have a cough at any one time in the peak months. Those with a new cough or temperature have been told to self-isolate for seven days.

Susan Hopkins, deputy director of Public Health England’s national infection service, said that Public Health England “used reasonable worst case scenario figures to restate the importance for people with symptoms to stay at home, including healthcare workers, to reduce the spread of the virus.”

Public Health England said that the 15% hospitalisation figure was determined using data reported from other countries. The agency also warned that laboratories were “under significant demand pressures,” meaning that they were unable to test all those with symptoms.

Last week, the government said that they would no longer be testing all suspected cases, focusing only on those in hospital with symptoms. This has caused upset, including from healthcare workers who are petitioning for NHS staff to also be prioritised for testing, so they do not have to take sick leave unnecessarily.

Junior doctor Rebecca McCauley started the petition¹—which has over 22 000 signatures so far—arguing that many staff were

facing the same problem that she was. “Do I stay off work for seven days [due to my cough], leaving a shortfall of staff and putting further strain on the already strained NHS, when the likelihood is that I don’t actually have covid-19?” she asked.

The government is also reportedly in talks with private hospitals to use their beds as part of the covid-19 response. Trade unions and the Labour Party have called on the government to requisition the unused beds—estimated at around 8000 from 570 hospitals.

In Wales, planned NHS surgery is set to be cancelled and non-urgent outpatient appointments put on hold.

Chris Whitty, chief medical adviser to the UK government, previously said that the NHS would have to push some routine care to before or after the expected peak of cases because of pressures on services from the virus.²

Meanwhile, in the US, a clinical trial has started testing a covid-19 vaccine on 45 young and healthy volunteers. The participants are not at risk of getting the virus, as the vaccine does not contain the virus, and will receive various doses of the vaccine, which was developed by the National Institutes of Health and biotechnology company Moderna. The aim of the trial is to test whether there are any side effects. Properly assessing any potential vaccine has been estimated to take a year to 18 months.

- 1 Change.org. Test frontline NHS staff for COVID-19 as a priority. <https://www.change.org/p/the-nhs-test-frontline-nhs-staff-for-covid-as-a-priority>
- 2 Mahase E. Covid-19: 90% of cases will hit NHS over nine week period, chief medical officer warns. *BMJ* 2020;368:m918. 10.1136/bmj.m918 32139397

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