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# Special report: Coronavirus

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DAVID RYDER/GETTY IMAGES

## A number of cases of covid-19 have been linked to a nursing home in Kirkland, Washington

On Tuesday, the UK government published a 27-page document setting out the UK's response to the virus. The report warned that a coronavirus outbreak could lead to school closures, police dropping low-priority cases and the National Health Service delaying non-urgent care.

The document acknowledges the potential impact on businesses. "In a stretching scenario, it is possible that up to one fifth of employees may be absent from work during peak weeks," it says.

The UK government's response is focused on containment and planning for delaying and mitigating the outbreak.

UK officials hope to delay the peak of the virus until the warmer spring and summer months when health services are less busy.

If the disease becomes established, mitigation measures will be introduced. These could include police concentrating only on serious crimes and maintaining public order if faced with a significant loss of officers and staff, and the NHS calling retired staff back to duty.

Local authorities may have to deal with "an increase in deaths", particularly among vulnerable and older people, and the government is considering how to distribute the UK's stockpiles of key medicines and equipment such as protective clothing.

In a sign that the military could be called in to help, the document says there are "well-practised arrangements for defence to provide support to civil authorities if requested".

The number of people in the UK who have tested positive for the virus stood at 51 as *New Scientist* went to press. ■

## Covid-19 spreads in US

Multiple outbreaks worldwide have led to countries stepping up their responses. By **Debora MacKenzie** and **Press Association**

WITH cases detected in more than 70 countries, and significant outbreaks not only in China but also in South Korea, Italy and Iran, the novel coronavirus first detected in Wuhan, China, has truly gone global.

This week, it emerged that the covid-19 virus could already be circulating in the US. Similar genetic sequences were detected in viruses from two people who contracted the disease weeks apart.

One comes from a case in Snohomish County, Washington, in which the infected person had no contact with another known case or outbreak location. Despite this, the virus sequence closely matches that in the first infection detected in the US, on 21 January,

in a man in the same county who had visited Wuhan.

Both sequences share a rare single mutation. "This strongly suggests that there has been cryptic transmission in Washington State for the past 6 weeks," tweeted Trevor Bedford at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle.

Testing in the US has been limited. China is doing 1.6 million tests a week, South Korea is testing upwards of 10,000 people a day and the UK had tested about 13,000 suspected cases by 28 February. By then, the US had tested only about 2500 people,

partly because only those with links to China were being tested.

On that day, however, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new testing guidelines, to permit testing of potentially locally acquired cases. Three were immediately reported in California, Oregon and Washington, including the latest Snohomish case.

Caitlin Rivers at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland says the US should now test hospitalised patients with severe respiratory disease of unknown cause, to see if they have covid-19. On 3 March, 105 US cases had been confirmed.

### The latest coronavirus news online

Keep up to date with the science of the outbreak  
[newscientist.com/article-topic/coronavirus](https://www.newscientist.com/article-topic/coronavirus)