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Guidance

NHS test and trace: how it works

An overview of the NHS test and trace service, including what happens if you test positive for coronavirus (COVID-19) or have had close contact with someone who has tested positive.

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The NHS test and trace service:

- ensures that anyone who develops symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) can quickly be tested to find out if they have the virus, and also includes targeted asymptomatic testing of NHS and social care staff and care home residents
- helps trace close recent contacts of anyone who tests positive for coronavirus and, if necessary, notifies them that they must self-isolate at home to help stop the spread of the virus

We are introducing this service to help return life more to normal, in a way that is safe and protects our NHS and social care. The service will allow us to trace the spread of the virus and isolate new infections and play a vital role in giving us early warning if the virus is increasing again, locally or nationally.

How test and trace helps fight the virus

The NHS test and trace service will help to control the rate of reproduction (R), reduce the spread of the infection and save lives. By playing your part through the actions set out below, you will directly help to contain the virus by reducing its spread. This means that, thanks to your efforts, we will be able to go as far as it is safe to go in easing lockdown measures.

You can help in the following ways:

- if you develop symptoms, you must continue to follow the rules to self-isolate with other members of your household and order a test to find out if you have coronavirus
- if you test positive for coronavirus, you must share information promptly about your recent contacts through the NHS test and trace service to help us alert other people who may need to self-isolate
- if you have had close recent contact with someone who has coronavirus, you must self-isolate if the NHS test and trace service advises you to do so

This specific guidance applies in England only. All 4 administrations are working closely together to have a consistent and joined-up approach to testing and tracing.

Definitions

'Self-isolation if you have symptoms' means you and all household members must remain at home. Do not go outside your home for any reason i.e. to work, school, or public areas, and do not use public transport or taxis. The guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection page (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance) has more information on self-isolation.

'Contact' means a person who has been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus and who may or may not live with them.

How NHS test and trace service works

Part 1: for someone with symptoms of coronavirus

1. isolate: as soon as you experience coronavirus symptoms, medical advice is clear: you must self-isolate for at least 7 days. Anyone else in your household must self-isolate for 14 days from when you started having symptoms
2. test: order a test immediately at www.nhs.uk/coronavirus (https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/) or call 119 if you have no internet access
3. results: if your test is positive, you must complete the remainder of your 7-day self-isolation. Anyone in your household must also complete self-isolation for 14 days from when you started having symptoms. If your test is negative, you and other household members no longer need to self-isolate
4. share contacts: if you test positive for coronavirus, the NHS test and trace service will send you a text or email alert or call you with instructions of how to share details of people with whom you have had close, recent contact and places you have visited. It is important that you respond as soon as possible so that we can give appropriate advice to those who need it. You will be told to do this online via a secure website or you will be called by one of our contract tracers.

Part 2: if you are contacted by the NHS test and trace service because you have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus

1. alert: you will be alerted by the NHS test and trace service if you have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus. The alert will usually come by text, email or phone call. You should then log on to the NHS test and trace website, which is normally the easiest way for you and the service to communicate with each other – but, if not, a trained call handler will talk you through what you must do. Under-18s will get a phone call and a parent or guardian will be asked to give permission for the call to continue

2. isolate: you will be told to begin self-isolation for 14 days from your last contact with the person who has tested positive. It's really important to do this even if you don't feel unwell because, if you have been infected, you could become infectious to others at any point up to 14 days. Your household doesn't need to self-isolate with you, if you do not have symptoms, but they must take extra care to follow the guidance on social distancing and handwashing and avoid contact with you at home

3. test if needed: if you develop symptoms of coronavirus, other members of your household must self-isolate immediately at home for 14 days and you must book a test at www.nhs.uk/coronavirus (https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/) or call 119 if you have no internet access. If your test is positive, you must continue to stay at home for at least 7 days and we will get in touch to ask about your contacts since they must self-isolate. If your test is negative, you must still complete your 14-day self-isolation period because the virus may not be detectable yet - this is crucial to avoid unknowingly spreading the virus.

People who develop symptoms of coronavirus

When to self-isolate

The medical advice is clear: you must self-isolate if you have coronavirus symptoms or live in the same household as somebody who does. The main symptoms of coronavirus are:

- high temperature – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature)
- new, continuous cough – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual)
- loss or change to your sense of smell or taste – this means you've noticed you cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal

For more information, read the further guidance on symptoms (https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/check-if-you-have-coronavirus-symptoms/).

If you have one or more of these symptoms, you must self-isolate straight away for 7 days – or longer if you still have symptoms other than cough or loss of sense of smell/taste.

If you live in the same household as someone with coronavirus symptoms, you must self-isolate straight away for 14 days.

How to order a test

Please tell us about your symptoms as soon as possible and get a test to find out if you have coronavirus. Please tell us about your symptoms as soon as possible. The sooner you have a test, the sooner we can let you know if you and other members of your household must remain in self-isolation.

Members of the public can order a test through the NHS website (https://www.nhs.uk/ask-for-a-coronavirus-test).

If you are an essential worker or an employer, please visit:

- essential workers (https://www.gov.uk/apply-coronavirus-test-essential-workers)
- employers (https://test-for-coronavirus.service.gov.uk/appointment)

If you don't have access to the internet, you can order a test by phoning 119.

Our guidance on testing (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested) has more information on our testing programme.

We've made it as easy as possible for everyone who has symptoms to access a test quickly, and there are now many potential ways to be tested:

- drive-through regional testing sites
- mobile testing units
- test kits delivered to your home
- hospital-based testing for NHS patients and staff
- dedicated testing centres in other care settings (for example, care homes)

When you order a test, you will get information on the options available to you.

We currently aim to provide results within 48 hours of taking a test, but some results may take longer.

You will get your results by text, email or phone – and the message will advise you about what to do next.

If you test negative

If you get a negative test result, this means you are at low risk of having coronavirus.

Other members of your household can stop self-isolating. If you feel well and no longer have symptoms similar to coronavirus, you can stop self-isolating. You could still have another virus, such as a cold or flu – in which case it is still best to avoid contact with other people until you are better.

If you test positive

If you get a positive test result, this means that when you took the test, you had coronavirus. You – and other members of your household – must continue to self-isolate.

Health and care workers

If you work in a health or care setting, you should follow the separate guidance for health and care workers on testing (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-management-of-exposed-healthcare-workers-and-patients-in-hospital-settings/covid-19-management-of-exposed-healthcare-workers-and-patients-in-hospital-settings) and when to return to work.

Telling people about your test result

If you develop symptoms, you may wish to alert the people with whom you have had close contact over the last 48 hours. You should tell them that you might have coronavirus but are waiting for a test result.

At this stage (until the test result is known), those people do not need to self-isolate, but they should take extra care in practising social distancing (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing) and good hygiene, like washing their hands regularly. They should also watch out for their own symptoms (https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/check-if-you-have-coronavirus-symptoms/).

You may want to write down your recent close contacts now so that you have them to hand if you test positive.

Sharing information about your recent contacts

If you get a positive test, we will contact you and ask you to share information about any close contacts you had just before or after you developed symptoms. This is vital if we are to stop the spread of the virus.

We will contact you by text message, email or phone. If you are under 18 years old, we will contact you by phone wherever possible and ask for your parent or guardian's permission to continue the call.

You will be sent a link to the NHS test and trace website and asked to create a confidential account where you can record details about your recent close contacts. If you do not have internet access or if you don't complete the online process, one of our contact tracers will phone you to gather this information from you.

The information you give will be handled in strict confidence and will only be kept and used in line with data protection laws. It will help us to contact people who are at risk of having been exposed to coronavirus and explain what they must do to help prevent the further spread of the virus.

When we contact people to advise them to self-isolate, we do not tell them your identity. But if you have alerted them when you first develop symptoms or when you get your test result, they will be better prepared for the advice we give them.

When we contact you

If the NHS test and trace service contacts you, the service will use text messages, email or phone.

All texts or emails will ask you to sign into the NHS test and trace contact-tracing website (https://contact-tracing.phe.gov.uk/).

If NHS test and trace calls you by phone, the service will be using a single phone number: 0300 013 5000.

All information you provide to the NHS test and trace service is held in strict confidence and will only be kept and used in line with the Data Protection Act 2018.

Contact tracers will:

- call you from 0300 013 5000
- send you text messages from 'NHS'
- ask you to sign into the NHS test and trace contact-tracing website (https://contact-tracing.phe.gov.uk/)
- ask for your full name and date of birth to confirm your identity, and postcode to offer support while self-isolating
- ask about the coronavirus symptoms you have been experiencing
- ask you to provide the name, telephone number and/or email address of anyone you have had close contact with in the 2 days prior to your symptoms starting
- ask if anyone you have been in contact with is under 18 or lives outside of England

Contact tracers will never:

- ask you to dial a premium rate number to speak to us (for example, those starting 09 or 087)
- ask you to make any form of payment or purchase a product or any kind
- ask for any details about your bank account
- ask for your social media identities or login details, or those of your contacts
- ask you for any passwords or PINs, or ask you to set up any passwords or PINs over the phone
- disclose any of your personal or medical information to your contacts
- provide medical advice on the treatment of any potential coronavirus symptoms

- ask you to download any software to your PC or ask you to hand over control of your PC, smartphone or tablet to anyone else
- ask you to access any website that does not belong to the government or NHS

What we will ask you

We will ask you:

- if you have family members or other household members living with you. In line with the medical advice they must remain in self-isolation for the rest of the 14-day period from when your symptoms began
- if you have had any close contact with anyone other than members of your household. We are interested in in the 48 hours before you developed symptoms and the time since you developed symptoms. Close contact means:
  - having face-to-face contact with someone (less than 1 metre away)
  - spending more than 15 minutes within 2 metres of someone
  - travelling in a car or other small vehicle with someone (even on a short journey) or close to them on a plane
- if you work in – or have recently visited – a setting with other people (for example, a GP surgery, a school or a workplace)

We will ask you to provide, where possible, the names and contact details (for example, email address, telephone number) for the people you have had close contact with. As with your own details these will be held in strict confidence and will be kept and used only in line with data protection laws.

How this information is used

Based on the information you provide, we will assess whether we need to alert your contacts and ask them to self-isolate.

We may refer the case to local public health experts if your case is complex, for example, if you work in or have recently visited:

- a health or care setting, such as a hospital or care home
- a prison or other secure setting
- a school for people with special needs
- critical national infrastructure or areas vital for national security

Local public health experts are Public Health England staff and teams employed by your local authority who work together with all parts of the local community to prevent or respond to local outbreaks.

The NHS coronavirus app

We are currently developing our NHS coronavirus app, which is being trialled on the Isle of Wight. When rolled out nationally this app will supplement the other forms of contact tracing.

People who have had close contact with someone who has coronavirus

If you are told to self-isolate

If we identify you as someone who has had close recent contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus, we will notify you that you must self-isolate in line with medical advice.

You may be feeling well and not have any symptoms, but it is still essential for you to follow the advice that you are given.

This is because, if you have been infected, you could be infectious to others at any point up to 14 days. Some people infected with the virus don't show any symptoms at all and it is therefore crucial to self-isolate to avoid unknowingly spreading the virus.

If you do not have symptoms, you must not seek a test, as the scientific evidence shows that the test may not be able to detect whether you have the virus.

How you will be told to self-isolate

If you are aged 18 or over, we will contact you by text message or email but will follow up by phone if we don't get a response. If we only have a landline number for you, we will contact you on that number.

If you are under 18 years old, we will contact you by phone wherever possible and ask for consent from your parent or guardian to continue the call.

If you have internet access, we will ask you to log onto our NHS test and trace website. This is the simplest way of giving you the information you need and the opportunity to ask any questions. The online service will also ask you to confirm that you are following the advice on self-isolation.

If you do not have internet access, we will arrange for a trained call handler to speak to you by phone to give you the information and advice you need.

What happens next

You must self-isolate for 14 days after you were in contact with the person who has tested positive for coronavirus. This is crucial to avoid unknowingly spreading the virus.

Self-isolation means staying at home and not going outside your home at any time. If you live with other people, they do not need to self-isolate, but they should avoid contact with you as far as possible and follow advice on hygiene. If you do not live with other people, you should seek help from others, or delivery services, for essential activities such as food shopping. Self-isolation can be particularly challenging if you are looking after children, or if you care for vulnerable people who cannot stay with friends or family.

If you go on to develop symptoms, anyone you live with must then self-isolate and you must report your symptoms and get tested.

It is crucial that you complete your 14-day self-isolation period if you've been identified as a contact, even if you get a negative test result. This is because you may have the virus, but it cannot yet be detected by a test, so you could unknowingly spread the virus if you leave the house. Other members of your household, however, do not need to remain in self-isolation.

When we contact you

If the NHS test and trace service contacts you, the service will use text messages, email or phone.

All texts or emails will ask you to sign into the NHS test and trace contact-tracing website (https://contact-tracing.phe.gov.uk).

If NHS test and trace calls you by phone, the service will be using a single phone number: 0300 013 5000.

All information you provide to the NHS test and trace service is held in strict confidence and will only be kept and used in line with the Data Protection Act 2018.

Contact tracers will:

- call you from 0300 013 5000
- send you text messages from 'NHS'
- ask for your full name and date of birth to confirm your identity, and postcode to offer support while self-isolating
- ask if you are experiencing any coronavirus symptoms
- provide advice on what you must do as you have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus

Contact tracers will never:

- ask you to dial a premium rate number to speak to us (for example, those starting 09 or 087)
- ask you to make any form of payment or purchase a product of any kind
- ask for any details about your bank account
- ask for your social media identities or login details, or those of your contacts
- ask you for any passwords or PINs, or ask you to set up any passwords or PINs over the phone
- disclose any of your personal or medical information to your contacts
- provide medical advice on the treatment of any potential coronavirus ymptoms
- ask you to download any software to your PC or ask you to hand over control of your PC, smartphone or tablet to anyone else
- ask you to access any website that does not belong to the government or NHS

Support for people who are self-isolating

We will direct you to your local authority helpline if you need the following during the period of self-isolation:

- practical or social support for yourself
- support for someone you care for
- financial support

This is so you can access the local support available to you, like help delivering food or medicine. You may also be able to get help from the NHS volunteer responders (https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-support).

Employers should support workers who are told to self-isolate and must not ask them to attend work. See the guidance on the NHS test and trace service for employers, businesses and workers (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-test-and-trace-workplace-guidance). If you are in employment, speak to your employer to discuss if you can work from home or other options are available during your period of isolation.

Workers in self-isolation are entitled to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) for every day they are in isolation, as long as they meet the eligibility conditions. Guidance has been produced for employees that are unable to work because they are self-isolating (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-test-and-trace-workplace-guidance).

The NHS test and trace service will provide a notification that can be used as evidence that someone has been told to self-isolate. This notification can be shared with an employer or education provider, for example.

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Explore the topic

- Protecting yourself and others from coronavirus (https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/protecting-yourselves-and-others)
- Testing for coronavirus (COVID-19) (https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/testing)