

COVID-19: Preparing for the future

Public summary

Background

Despite the UK's successful vaccination programme, there are concerns the NHS and social care system will come under huge pressure over the summer and into winter from rising cases of COVID-19 and traditional winter viruses such as flu.

The Academy of Medical Sciences was asked by the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor to look ahead to the winter, forecast the greatest health risks and draw up a plan to help protect the public.

The report draws on the latest scientific evidence and models, the expert advice of leading doctors and scientists, and discussions with the public and patients.

Conclusion

This winter the UK could face a triple blow of COVID-19, a flu epidemic and a rise in other seasonal illnesses. This would put even more pressure on an overstretched NHS and social care system unless we take action now and in the coming months.

Our plan of action is detailed. It includes calls for the UK to maximise the speed and uptake of vaccination, supercharge the NHS to increase beds and staffing levels, offer financial support to people self-isolating, encourage people to take sensible precautions, and place local communities at the heart of responding to local COVID-19 outbreaks. Messages to the public about COVID-19 need to be clearer and more effective.

Winter 2021/22

During a normal winter, the NHS and social care system run at full capacity. That's because more people need help with health problems such as strokes, heart disease and asthma in winter, while infectious diseases such as flu are at their peak. The system could be even more stretched than usual this winter.

We have identified the following challenges that will add pressure to the NHS and social care system over the coming months:

- The UK is now in the grip of a third wave of COVID-19 which will continue this summer as social restrictions are relaxed. Although the successful vaccination programme means fewer people will die from COVID-19 compared to last winter, more infections will leave a lasting health impact on some patients.
- As COVID-19 cases rise, long COVID will place increasing pressure on the NHS. If a new COVID-19 variant emerges that spreads more easily, it will add even greater pressure and potentially a fourth wave in early 2022.
- Last winter saw low levels of flu and other respiratory viruses. As a result, people may have lower than normal levels of natural immunity as they head into this winter. Models suggest there could be twice as many cases of flu and respiratory syncytial virus (a virus similar to the common cold, but which can be serious in babies and the elderly) as normal this winter – which could coincide with high rates of COVID-19.

- The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown has taken its toll on the UK's mental and physical health. Increased mental and physical frailty – particularly of older people – will increase pressure on the NHS and social care system and could lead to more cases of severe asthma, heart disease, stroke, heart attacks and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) this winter. In addition, the NHS is still struggling to catch up from previous delays in diagnosis and treatment of non-COVID illness.
- The NHS will face more disruption as hospitals deal with the waiting lists that have built up during the pandemic, while still trying to limit the spread of COVID-19.
- NHS and care home staff will have been coping with the pandemic for 18 months – so burnout and staff vacancies could be an issue too.

What the UK needs to do

The report outlines a plan of action to reduce pressure on the NHS and social care system this winter. COVID has hit people from poorer and disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minority groups and deprived regions hardest. All efforts to tackle the pandemic and help the economy should halt and reverse this unfair impact. We must:

- Speed up the vaccination programme and ensure as many adults as possible are vaccinated, while preparing for COVID-19 booster jabs and flu vaccination in the autumn.
- Support the global vaccination drive to control the pandemic and reduce the risk of new variants emerging.
- Ask vaccine regulators to continue to look at whether children should get jabs as more safety data becomes available.
- Increase the number of NHS beds and staff, urgently work to reduce staff vacancies, and improve infection control to cut the number of people picking up diseases in hospitals and care homes.
- Encourage people to take responsibility to protect themselves and others where transmission could be high, taking actions such as wearing face coverings, handwashing, ensuring good ventilation, and keeping socially distanced in crowded spaces.
- Supercharge the test and trace system – and offer tests, if possible, that can tell the difference between COVID-19, flu, and other diseases with similar symptoms.
- Make it easier for people with COVID-19 to self-isolate by offering greater financial and practical support.
- Investigate how many people are living with long COVID, the seriousness of the disease and how long it lasts. Similarly, research is needed into the mental and physical health impacts of lockdown.
- Be better at communicating the latest evidence about symptoms, spread and the best ways to curb COVID-19.
- Ensure all plans to tackle outbreaks involve partnership between central Government, local government, local public health teams and local communities.

While there is an understandable and intense desire for 'normality' to return after the social restrictions and lockdowns of the last year, we need to sustain our efforts to limit the spread of the disease and the harm it can cause this year and beyond.

Read more

www.acmedsci.ac.uk/covid-19-preparing-for-the-future-press-release

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